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Brief History of México

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A Brief History of México

I. Early history

The first Mexicans are believed to have migrated from northwest Asia across the Bering Strait many thousands of years ago. By 900 B.C. they constructed their first urban communities at San Lorenzo in southeast Veracruz state. Other prominent civilizations later emerged in Valley of Mexico at Teotihuacan, in the Valley of Oaxaca at Monte Alban, and at the dozens of cities built by the Maya in southeast.

Some thirty-one million people lived in Mexico when the Spanish invasion began on February 18, 1519. Faced with the challenge of prevailing against such numbers with his initial force of 508 soldiers and 100 sailors, Hernan Cortes decided to divide and conquer. Fortunately for him, the Aztec Empire based in the Valley of Mexico had created many powerful enemies through brutal rule and by refusing to allow even the best and brightest of conquered subjects to rise into the imperial hierarchy. When Cortes began his final assault on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (today Mexico City) in 1521, his army included some 250,000 Indian warriors and barely more than 1,000 Spaniards.

While the war of conquest resulted in heavy casualties, the diseases that the Europeans carried on their bodies (small pox, influenza, and the bubonic plague) proved far deadlier. Between the violence and the germs, an estimated ninety per cent of the native population died. Even so, the remaining Indians outnumbered the colonists.

The Spanish recognized the necessities of coexistence imposed by their minority status and consequently gave legal title and protection to many loyal Indian villages. However, at no point did they or their *criollos* (native-born white offspring) consider the Indians and those of mixed ancestry (*mestizo*) their equals. The economic and social practices of colonial México reflected that sentiment and created a colony divided along lines of ethnicity as well as socioeconomic class.

Throughout this period, the Indians retained a strong sense of identity, territoriality, and resentment towards the *criollos*. As the colonial period drew to a close, the Spaniards constituted a mere two per cent of the population and the *criollos* only ten. The royal officials and the laws they administered derived their authority from the king, who ruled from Madrid. When a monarch died, another took his place. This left unresolved the question of who would exercise authority if by some unforeseen circumstance no monarchy existed. That hypothetical issue became a real one in 1808.

In that year, Napoleon Bonaparte decided to add Spain to the growing number of nations under French dominion and to which the ideas of the French Revolution would be exported. He waited until the followers of the King and Crown Prince began openly fighting over the issue of whether to resist or appease France and then invited the monarch and his son to a French palace for mediation. There, he arrested them and soon moved to install his own government in Madrid.

Given these circumstances, the predominantly criollo municipal council of Mexico City contended that in the absence of a king, authority should revert to the cities as per medieval Spanish custom. However, royal officials in Mexico believed that the king remained sovereign even though he was captive. As such, these Spanish administrators and officers considered themselves under no obligation to acknowledge any group of colonists as sovereign over Mexico or over the Spaniards who administered the colonial government. Instead, royal officials placed colonists who had advocated this change of authority under arrest. Also, the Spanish intensified their surveillance of literate Mexicans in an effort to find more opponents of imperial sovereignty.

II. The National Period (1810-1910)

Father Miguel Hidalgo was one such foe. In early September of 1810, he learned that the Spanish knew of his opposition and planned to arrest him. Facing with the choice of fleeing or fighting, he proclaimed independence on September 16, 1810 from the balcony of his church in the village of Dolores. As he marched towards Mexico City, many of the poor and the resentful and the hungry joined his ranks. He soon found himself leading a motley-armed group of some 60,000 southwards. En route, many of the Indians and poorer mestizos took the opportunity to loot and burn rural estates (*haciendas* and *plantaciones*) and kill their owners. In response, criollos and Spanish colonists closed ranks against Hidalgo. Although his forces met defeat at the battle of Monte de Cruces and Hidalgo himself subsequently was captured and executed, the war continued for more than a decade.

By 1821, the royalists believed their victory to be imminent. The rebel forces has been reduced to two groups totaling no more than four thousand soldiers, However, unforeseen developments in Europe once more disrupted the political and military equations. At that time, royalist commanders in México learned that rebellious subjects had overthrown the restored king of Spain and that the new government intended to grant suffrage to all men except Spanish subjects of African descent. In Mexico, that consequence of such a change would have meant a loss of criollo power to a vengeful populace. Consequently, a majority of the criollo officers in the Royal Army switched sides and joined with their former foes to proclaim an independent nation. The war ended with the criollos in control of all of Mexico's institutions.

From 1821 to 1855, the question of who would participate in the political and economic life of the nation dominated the national dialogue to the exclusion of almost all else. Divisions proved so bitter that the presidency of the nation changed hands, often violently, forty-seven times during those twenty-four years. In this type of environment, no effective government existed for very long. Activities essential for national development such as the maintenance of public order, the defense of the national territory, the construction of public works, and the collection of taxes did not take place.

To create a barrier to American migration, the Mexican government allowed immigrants to settle in Stephen F. Austin's Texas colony in that hope that they would assimilate and become loyal Mexicans. This did not occur. In 1836, the Texans responded to the imposition of a new and more restrictive Mexican constitution by declaring their state an independent nation. In 1845, the United States admitted Texas to the union. Mexico responded by branding this decision an act of war.

In 1846 President James Knox Polk ordered U.S. troops into the disputed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. Following a clash between soldiers of the two armies, war began. In the subsequent peace treaty, the Americans gained the two provinces of Mexico (Nuevo Mexico and Alta California) whose acquisition Polk deemed the primary goal of his administration. The loss of approximately half of the national territory to the U.S. left Mexicans embittered. However, internal strife continued to consume their nation.

In 1855, Liberal General Juan Alvarez successfully led an army in defeating Conservative President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's forces. The victorious Liberals promptly abolished legal privileges of the Church and Army, ordered the seizure and subsequent sale of all Church property other than the churches themselves, and proclaimed universal male suffrage. In turn, this led to a second war between Liberals and Conservatives, known as the War of the Reforma (1858-1861). This too ended in a Liberal victory. However, disgruntled conservatives then allied themselves with the French, whose emperor, Napoleon III, invaded Mexico in 1862. This third war between Liberals and Conservatives ended with another Liberal victory in 1867.

At the head of the victorious Liberal coalition stood Benito Juárez, Mexico's first and only Indian president. Born into poverty in the state of Oaxaca, he overcame great odds to obtain a law degree and soon entered politics. His steadfast dedication to the rule of law, to civil liberties and to equality assured him of a major place in Mexico's history as did his critical role in placing these principles at the core of the Constitution of 1857. But his role during the French invasion ensured that he would be the most revered of Mexican presidents to this day. As the invaders and their domestic allies prepared to enter Mexico City, Juárez left the capital with a little more than an escort and fled to the remote northwest city of El Paso (today Ciudad Juárez). There, he remained for five years as resistance to the occupier slowly grew and the invaders eventually left. His

persistence probably saved the national cause and ever since then he has been a symbol of the struggle against adversity.

The order that so many sought for Mexico came with the administration of President Porfirio Díaz. He seized power in 1876 and ruled Mexico until 1910, a period known as the Porfiriato. Although production of industrial and agricultural commodities increased during these decades, Díaz' model for national development proved deficient. In essence, he focused on the gross national product while neglecting to develop the most important resource of all: the people. By 1910, so many Mexicans had lost their land through evictions designed to create vast agricultural estates that only four per cent of the population owned the ground upon which they lived. More than ninety per cent of the population remained illiterate. Concurrently, Díaz' decision to repress all meaningful political opposition by lethal as well as non-violent means alienated the slowly growing middle class. Lastly and in spite of Díaz's mixed ancestry, the Porfirians, like the Spanish and the criollos who led post-independence Mexico, held the majority of the nation's population in contempt. The result was the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

III. The Modern Era (1910-2014)

The Mexican Revolution began with the war to overthrow Díaz (1910) and ended with the adoption of the Constitution of 1917. Three factions contended for power. The largest, led by Francisco (Pancho) Villa, sought to create a nation that socially and economically resembled the largely self-sufficient rural communities of northern México owned and controlled by their inhabitants. In this scenario, the nation's cities and industries would produce primarily for a domestic market and would be subordinate to the rurally-based majority of the population. Villa's support came mainly from northern Mexico.

A second faction, led by Emiliano Zapata, sought to dissolve the plantations and haciendas by giving their lands to peasants. In this scenario, lands and natural resources would be communally owned and controlled. Zapata did not devote great attention to larger issues such as the role of industry and urbanization. Although often branded a modern Marxist, he in reality was a reactionary who sought to return the Indian population to the autonomy they had enjoyed centuries before.

The victors, led by Venustiano Carranza, sought to create an industrially based urban society and stressed modernity as one of their main goals. Aided by substantial U.S. material support supplied through the American-occupied port of Veracruz, the Carrancistas won. However, the new constitution embodied concepts advocated by the defeated as well as by the victors. For example, the new constitution declared null and

void all legal proceedings by which the Porfirians had seized hundreds of millions of acres of land.

The Carrancistas hoped that all elements of Mexican society would join a single ruling party to eliminate the factionalism that had plagued Mexico since the Spanish began sorting Mexicans in castes. After changing names on several occasions during the 1920s and 1930s, the party adopted the name by which it is known today: the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or *PRI* (Institutional Revolutionary Party). The PRI held power from 1917 to 2000. They accomplished this goal not only by bringing a wide range of groups into the party, but by employing a combination of bribery, exclusion, intimidation and lethal violence to curtail opposition.

From 1920 to 1968, the party maneuvered as necessary to master the political winds of the day. During the Great Depression, the administration of President Lazaro Cardenas turned sharply leftwards, returning more than fifty million acres of land seized by the Porfirians and funneling loans to communal Indian villages. From 1940 onwards, the party instead chose to emphasize industrial development and encouraged of the private sector with infrastructure projects and interpretations of law favorable to the business community. During the 1950s and much of the 1960s, the economy grew at an annual rate of six per cent. PRIistas pointed with pride to such growth as well as to the fact that the life span of the average Mexican increased from forty years in the early part of the century to sixty years as proof of their success.

However, by 1968, the party's unity crumbled. The socialist and progressive wings had long argued that the PRI leadership had abandoned the duty of returning lands to the poor; denied credit to farms and communes in the interest of serving industry, allowed foreigners to again dominate certain Mexican industries, fostered a polarized distribution of income reminiscent of the Porfiriato, and sought to repress opponents. The PRI's leaders argued that their accomplishments stood without parallel in Mexican history. An additional, if often unspoken argument, was that if the repression of opponents on either side of the political spectrum was the price of such progress; that price remained well worth paying.

When several hundred leaders of the protest movement rallied at Mexico City's Tlaltelolco Plaza on October 2, 1968, army helicopters and marksmen opened fire. At least four hundred people perished. In the following days, more executions took place. President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (no relation to Porfirio Diaz) No formal investigation of the events of that week ever took place. The PRI now split.

The Leftists formed a number of successive parties, the most recent of which is the PRD. Concurrently, many of the more conservative PRIistas, disillusioned by the government's violence, joined the PAN.

Diaz's successor, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, vainly tried to restore party unity by expanding social welfare programs, by visiting communities throughout the country, and by striking a strident leftist and nationalist tone in his foreign policy. His criticism of the United States' role in Latin America and his support of the anti-Zionism resolution at the United Nations were part of this effort. Also, he welcomed refugees, such as Isabel Allende, fleeing dictatorships in Latin America just as Lázaro Cárdenas had welcome tens of thousands of Spaniards fleeing the victorious General Francisco Franco in 1936. But the wounds opened at Tlatelolco could not be closed.

Those events of 1968 marked the beginning of a series of crises. The first of these was economic. During his 1976-1982 presidency, José López Portillo sought to stimulate the economy by undertaking infrastructure projects using money obtained from loans based upon future oil revenue. When the price of petroleum collapsed, the nation was left with massive federal debts and a weakened private sector. As bankruptcies increased, López Portillo nationalized the country's banks. This action angered the business community. Simultaneously, spiraling inflation and rising unemployment destroyed loyalty to the PRI across a wide segment of Mexican society.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, inflation accelerated to the point at which the number of pesos required to buy a single United States dollar increased from eight to 3,300. The life savings of many Mexicans as well innumerable business large and small were lost.

By 1988, dissatisfaction with the PRI had become so widespread that a leftist opposition grouping of three small parties led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas seriously challenged the PRI in the presidential elections. The victory of his opponent, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, probably rested upon vote fraud. At the state and local levels, the PAN and PRD began winning more and more elections.

Then on January 1, 1994, the largest Indian rebellion since the 1847 Caste War erupted. Led by four Maya commanders, they seized the capital of the state of Chiapas and other areas of that southern state. Three intertwined factors led to the revolt: poverty, corruption, and official indifference. Chiapas ranked as the poorest state in Mexico and the majority of its Indian citizens eked out a meager living from the little land they owned. Over the preceding decades, the Federal government made little effort to change this. Chiapas' remoteness from the demographic, political, and economic centers of power ensured that the state's development needs would receive a low priority. Also, the unspoken but powerful opinion that Indians were determined to remain poor played a factor. Lastly, the political syndicates that ran the state for their own benefit regularly produced large majorities for the PRI and in return did not fear interference from the Federal government. Levels of corruption proved extraordinary. In one case, a town's airport was built twenty miles from the city so that construction could take place on a political boss' land.

The rebels called their army the *Ejercito Zapatista Liberacion Nacional* (National Zapatista Liberation Army). They chose as their spokesman Subcomandante Marcos, a non-Indian history professor at a suburban Mexico City campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Although he spoke and wrote of concepts such as neoliberalism and imperialism, the core of this rebel movement proved to be regional and Indian. The federal government confined the rebels to a small area and subsequently diffused the situation with prolonged negotiation involving some concessions.

From 1968 onward, the violence, the inflation, the consequent loss of employment and savings, and the economy's chronic inability to generate jobs at a rate equal to the growth of the population catalyzed a massive migration of Mexicans to the United States. The most reliable estimates are that some 12,000,000 Mexicans have sought permanent or temporary residence on the north side of the Rio Grande since the first of the economic crises began in the late 1970s. The wages sent back to Mexico by these workers now constitute Mexico's second largest source of revenue.

A far more violent migration also developed during these decades as criminal syndicates within Mexico sought to satisfy the demands of the United States' millions of substance abusers. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamines, and any other illicit substance that could be sold to Americans was processed, transported and vended by these gangs. The billions of dollars in profits financed the expansion of these syndicates into groups capable of bribing, intimidating, or and killing police and judges who obstructed them.

So massive were the losses of wealth and confidence and public order that the PRI's defeat became inevitable. In 2000, PAN candidate Vicente Fox Quesada won the presidential election even though the PRI and PRD retained joint control of both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. There, they blocked Fox' major proposals. His successor, PANista Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, significantly increased the involvement of the armed forces in combatting the drug syndicates (*narcotraficantes*). The new president believed that only the federal government possessed the power to prevent the narcotraficantes from emerging as a parallel government. These efforts have not resulted in the eradication of the trafficking syndicates. Several factors account for this failure.

First, the capture of syndicate leaders often results not in the disintegration of the syndicate, but in the replacement of that leader. Second, the syndicates appear to be coalescing rather than fracturing. Two cartels, the Sinaloa and the Zeta, now dominate the drug trade in the majority of the nation. Third, the syndicates' tactics make the task of the armed forces more difficult. Instead of fighting stationary battles, they often target a town's police station, killing officers and then local elected officials. Although the federal government will respond with troops, the narcotrafficantes usually are gone by the time troops arrive and the local administration and population has been taught that they can be assaulted at will. In this manner, federal authority has been destroyed

in many areas of the nation, particularly in the areas bordering the United States. Lastly, the quality of training, equipment, and integrity of many of Mexico's police forces leaves much to be desired.

Calderon's administration failed to crush the drug syndicates just as surely as did Fox's. In the twelve year period of PAN presidencies extending from 2000 to 2012, some 60,000 Mexicans lost their lives to drug-related violence. Crimes such as kidnapping and robbery significantly increased. The PANista failure to remedy this rising tide of violence constituted one of two factors in his party's loss of power in the 2012 presidential election. Economic problems were the other cause. For although Calderon could point to increases in the gross domestic product in excess of those in the United States, these improvements brought little change to the forty per cent of Mexicans living below the poverty line.

Consequently, the PRI candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto won the presidency by a wide margin in 2012. A question of major importance remains whether he indeed will bring a new, honest, and effective administration to Mexico or whether the PRIistas will fall back into their old corporatist pattern of corruption. Interestingly, the new president does not publicly identify himself as a technocrat or a dinosaur.

Armed Forces

Mexico's armed forces report to two separate cabinet-level officials. The army reports to the Secretary of National Defense while the Navy, the Naval Air Force, and the Marines report to the Maritime Secretary. The Mexican Air Force is considered a branch of the army.

The primary objective of Mexico's armed forces is the maintenance of domestic order. Given this goal, the absence of external military threats, and no foreign commitments other than the occasional humanitarian mission; Mexico probably does not need Mach 2+ jets or state-of-the-art tanks. However, this does not alter the unpleasant reality that much of the counter-insurgency and counter-narcotrafficking equipment is obsolescent. For example, the Vietnam-era Bell Huey helicopters and the more modern propeller-driven planes that can be used for strafing are quite inferior to the range of more platforms now available.

The armed forces budget currently totals a modest .05 per cent of the gross domestic product and that level of spending is reflected in type of equipment used. Mexico possesses no main battle tank, no jet fighter more recent than the ten F-5 and two F5-E Tigers purchased from the United States in 1982, and no air defense missiles. Similarly, the army's tactical air support consists of middle and late Cold War era helicopters and some propeller-driven aircraft such as the Swiss-made Pilatus P-7.

Since the civil conflict between powerful narcotics syndicates and the government intensified, exact and recent figures about the size and disposition of the armed forces are not as readily available as might be wished. Based upon the most recent information, the air force consists of just under 12,000 personnel, including a 1,500 man airborne brigade. The roster of combat aircraft includes the ten F-5 jets, T-33 trainer jets, seventy Pilatus P-7 aircraft, seventy attack helicopters, and a transport fleet of thirty-five aircraft including seven Lockheed C-130 planes.

The Mexican Navy reliably is reported to number some 37,000 personnel, of whom 8,600 are Marines. Although the general headquarters are in Mexico City, there are separate headquarters for the Pacific forces (Acapulco) and the Atlantic forces (Veracruz). The Navy confronts the same equipment problems as does the Air Force – a mixture of platforms, many of which are quite old and rather obsolescent. Newer equipment includes six *Halcon* (Falcon) class patrol boats purchased in 1983 with platforms for helicopters. The most recently available figures list the principal forces as three destroyers, eight frigates and 109 coastal combatants. In addition to traditional responsibilities such as defense of territorial waters, the Navy also is responsible for dredging the nation's port facilities and for oceanographic research.

The Mexican Army includes some 192,000 active-duty personnel and reserves of 559,000. The main maneuver units consist of three corps of three brigades each based in the region of Mexico City. Also based in the capital area are elite units such as the Special Forces Brigades and the Presidential Guard. Most of the remaining troops are posted to each of the nation's twelve military regions, which in turn are divided into forty-five military zones. Both independent regiments and battalions are posted to each of these zones.

The army's equipment consists of a full range of light infantry equipment such as the domestically manufactured FX-05 Xihuatl battle rifle, the Heckler & Koch HK 33 Assault Rifle, and the Browning M2 machine gun. The artillery arm largely consists of towed weapons, including 105 mm howitzers and light, medium, and heavy mortars. The Army's armored fighting vehicle is the French-built ERC 90F1 Lynx, which mounts a ninety millimeter cannon.

Although Mexico's Constitution requires all able-bodied men to undergo military training, this universal service consists of a few perfunctory drills and a very brief time on the shooting range.

Recent U.S. – Mexican Relations

Relations between the two nations remain complex with mixed objectives and feelings on both sides of the border. The considerable differences between the economic, military and demographic power of the two countries gives rise to a natural suspicion and resentment on the part of the Mexicans. Given the U.S. conquest of half of that

nation's territory during the 1846-1848 war, the subsequent American economic domination of Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and U.S. intervention during the Mexican Revolution; these concerns are not without foundation.

But conversely, Mexicans of all socio-economic strata understand that the United States can be of use to them. The Americans provide an adjacent and affluent market for Mexican products. Imported U.S. capital and technology can be of use. Last but not least, the money sent back to Mexico by expatriates working in the United States now constitute the nation's second largest source of foreign earnings and provide financial sustenance to millions of Mexicans. México seeks a close relationship with the United States in which Mexican sovereignty remains respected. For example, the considerable American military equipment offered for anti-drug efforts under the Merida Plan remains welcome while the presence of American advisors to go with that equipment would be considered an unacceptable diminution of Mexican sovereignty.

In pursuit of traditional objectives, the United States seeks open global markets and successfully obtained such access to Mexico with the passage of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement. However, the United States remains concerned with the migration of so many Mexicans into the United States. While this additional labor proved welcome during periods of economic growth, the recent economic recession resulted in many Americans viewing the migrants as competitors rather than fellow-workers.

Also, the flow of drugs into the United States remains an issue of great concern and ranks as perhaps the most critical unresolved issue. The Americans argue that without this flow of drugs, the United States would not have a narcotics problem. The Mexicans argue that if Americans would stop using these substances, the problem would vanish. Ironically, as the two nations become more closely linked, some tensions seem to become more acute.

This contrasts with earlier Cold War relations. Then, both nations accepted their differences. The United States recognized that as a country that endured six invasions, Mexico placed non-interference in the affairs of other nations at the top of her list of global priorities. So while Mexico's refusal to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization rankled some U.S. administrations, the Americans accepted the decision without retaliating. Similarly, while the Americans resented the 1938 nationalization of México's petroleum, they accepted that reality and have continued to purchase Mexican oil. Indeed, from the resumption of oil imports to United States in 1938 until the present day, Mexicans never withheld a drop for political reasons.

(continued on the next page)

IV. The Future

Although the events of the past four decades give pessimists much ammunition, there also is some cause for optimism. During this same period of time, Mexico transformed itself from a one party state to a multiparty democracy. The strong extended family structure that has served as the bedrock of the nation and which has survived war and famine remains largely intact. Most importantly, there remains a quiet and deep pride in being Mexican. To quote a very Mexican phrase, *Dios tu bendecirá* (God will bless you).

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