

# INTRODUCTION

*“Whatever else Mexico may be, she is never dull.”*



*Lesley Byrd Simpson (1962)*

**E**vents in the few years since *A Brief History of Mexico* was first published have been so dramatic as to make a new edition essential. The democratic reforms in 2000 that ended 70 years of party domination of Mexican politics by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) have swept in a new era in Mexican history. Election results now are determined by honest ballot counts, not the preferences of PRI officials. The press, no longer subsidized by the reigning government, is outspoken and critical. Grassroots organizations clamor with impunity for all manner of reforms, especially for more government openness and accountability—and the government listens. Drug lords no longer fill the Swiss bank accounts of the presidential entourage. The corrupt party dictatorship that so long ruled Mexico has ended, and everything from labor relations to indigenous rights has been affected. Moreover, these momentous changes, unlike so many others in Mexican history, were accomplished peacefully. Mexico's new democratic institutions were severely tested, however, by the close results of the 2006 presidential election and months of protests over suspected electoral fraud. Once again, Mexico resolved the crisis peacefully.

Mexico has undergone other remarkable changes as well. Since 1991 the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has contributed to the industrialization of Mexico, especially along the border with the United States, while it has undermined the agricultural base of the country. A quarter of the populace works to sustain itself through farming, and few now can succeed. The erosion of stability in this sector has contributed to a phenomenal increase in the number of Mexicans migrating to the United States. This migration, both legal and illegal, has had an unexpected result for Mexico: \$13 billion sent from the United States back to families and communities in Mexico in 2002 alone.

Increased migration and free trade have created such profound cultural and economic links between the two countries in the past decade

that it has been given a special name: “transnationalism.” Mexicans re-create their culture in communities in the United States and bring their resources to bear on their homes in Mexico. Some Mexican Americans even return to their villages to run for political office; many others vote in local elections, bringing U.S. political values with them.

Despite the increasing familiarity of Mexican culture in the United States, Mexico remains something of an enigma to its neighbors north of the border. Yet Mexico is vital to the United States, both as a good neighbor and an economic partner. Knowledge of Mexico’s distinctive heritage is indispensable for continued cooperation and understanding. Fortunately for the reader, Mexican history is fascinating. It is rooted in a sophisticated indigenous civilization that in its heyday built some of the largest cities in the world. When the Spanish conquerors arrived, they encountered a densely settled land, not the wilderness that marked much of what is now known as the United States. The drama of Hernán Cortés’s conquest ushered in three centuries of Spanish colonization as well as the first hospital and university in the Americas. This early history laid the foundation for modern Mexico, one that is predominantly mestizo, a mixed race and culture of Indians and Spaniards. It is the formation of this modern nation, with its revolutionary struggles against a legacy of Spanish feudalism and its proud contribution of artists and Nobel laureates, that holds the key to understanding the Mexico of today.

This history begins with the peopling of the Americas and gives broad coverage to Mexico’s pre-Columbian civilizations that thrived from at least 1200 B.C. until the Spanish conquest in A.D. 1519. Even though much of this past is not recorded in writing and so is not technically “history,” it is integral to understanding contemporary indigenous culture as well as Mexico’s pride in its unique past. It even clarifies popular political gestures and expenditures—such as President Vicente Fox’s flying to London in 2002 in order to personally inaugurate an important exhibit of Aztec art. So much progress has been made in the last decades toward understanding the values and beliefs of these ancient societies that a close examination is well rewarded.

This history also lingers over the early exchanges between the Spaniards and Indians. Not only is it fascinating to examine the unexpected encounter of two civilizations, but the period is critical for the future course of events in Mexico. The Spanish empire left its mark in language and art, in religion, politics, and the economy. When Mexico gained its independence, it found itself without a political center and with an economy and social system that would hold it back for decades longer.

Mexico’s struggle for political stability and independence was not achieved until the 20th century. It was a hard-fought effort that had to overcome centuries of colonial occupation by Spain followed by nearly a century of internal strife and regional factionalism. In the end, it took the upheaval and devastation of the Revolution of 1910 to set it on its modern course. These historic events defined Mexican national identity, providing it not only with a modern constitutional government but also heroes and icons that have made their way into school primers as well as art and literature. In the 21st century, Mexico is undergoing another revolution, the so-called democratic revolution that is opening up its politics to vigorous dialogue and speeding the country along the path of economic globalization.

Accounts of political and cultural events too often give a monolithic and dehumanized impression of society. But many individuals do not walk in step with the main course of political events, especially not in a country of such regional and ethnic diversity. And many political events have an unexpected impact on the fabric of society and the ecology of the land. To provide more contrasts and a deeper understanding of the variety of human responses to events, this history attempts to elaborate various epochs with contemporary quotations and illustrations of period art. It also provides asides in photo captions or boxed “close-ups” about everything from religious icons to the sacredness of corn, from the decipherment of ancient hieroglyphs to life in the capital during a military coup.

The close-ups also are intended to amplify the unusual backgrounds of some important individuals in politics. Just as often they give voice to those who are not usually represented in the official histories: a Spaniard preferring life in a Maya village to rejoining his fellow conquistadors; a poet choosing the nunnery over the viceregal court; a successful mulatto painter in a racist society. This history also uses the close-ups to overcome a tendency in Mexican histories to abandon the fate of the indigenous people a century after the Spanish conquest. The Indians become numbing statistics about impoverished peasants. Yet many native peoples (estimated to constitute 10 to 30 percent of the populace) have struggled to preserve to this day their separate cultural identity and ancient traditions. Their growing resurgence captured world attention in the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and forced an amendment to the Mexican constitution in 2001. A number of the close-ups spotlight their diverse methods of survival. Others follow the fortunes of some Mixtec Indians in Oaxaca through the centuries after the conquest to the present day.

that it has been given a special name: “transnationalism.” Mexicans re-create their culture in communities in the United States and bring their resources to bear on their homes in Mexico. Some Mexican Americans even return to their villages to run for political office; many others vote in local elections, bringing U.S. political values with them.

Despite the increasing familiarity of Mexican culture in the United States, Mexico remains something of an enigma to its neighbors north of the border. Yet Mexico is vital to the United States, both as a good neighbor and an economic partner. Knowledge of Mexico’s distinctive heritage is indispensable for continued cooperation and understanding. Fortunately for the reader, Mexican history is fascinating. It is rooted in a sophisticated indigenous civilization that in its heyday built some of the largest cities in the world. When the Spanish conquerors arrived, they encountered a densely settled land, not the wilderness that marked much of what is now known as the United States. The drama of Hernán Cortés’s conquest ushered in three centuries of Spanish colonization as well as the first hospital and university in the Americas. This early history laid the foundation for modern Mexico, one that is predominantly mestizo, a mixed race and culture of Indians and Spaniards. It is the formation of this modern nation, with its revolutionary struggles against a legacy of Spanish feudalism and its proud contribution of artists and Nobel laureates, that holds the key to understanding the Mexico of today.

This history begins with the peopling of the Americas and gives broad coverage to Mexico’s pre-Columbian civilizations that thrived from at least 1200 B.C. until the Spanish conquest in A.D. 1519. Even though much of this past is not recorded in writing and so is not technically “history,” it is integral to understanding contemporary indigenous culture as well as Mexico’s pride in its unique past. It even clarifies popular political gestures and expenditures—such as President Vicente Fox’s flying to London in 2002 in order to personally inaugurate an important exhibit of Aztec art. So much progress has been made in the last decades toward understanding the values and beliefs of these ancient societies that a close examination is well rewarded.

This history also lingers over the early exchanges between the Spaniards and Indians. Not only is it fascinating to examine the unexpected encounter of two civilizations, but the period is critical for the future course of events in Mexico. The Spanish empire left its mark in language and art, in religion, politics, and the economy. When Mexico gained its independence, it found itself without a political center and with an economy and social system that would hold it back for decades longer.

Mexico’s struggle for political stability and independence was not achieved until the 20th century. It was a hard-fought effort that had to overcome centuries of colonial occupation by Spain followed by nearly a century of internal strife and regional factionalism. In the end, it took the upheaval and devastation of the Revolution of 1910 to set it on its modern course. These historic events defined Mexican national identity, providing it not only with a modern constitutional government but also heroes and icons that have made their way into school primers as well as art and literature. In the 21st century, Mexico is undergoing another revolution, the so-called democratic revolution that is opening up its politics to vigorous dialogue and speeding the country along the path of economic globalization.

Accounts of political and cultural events too often give a monolithic and dehumanized impression of society. But many individuals do not walk in step with the main course of political events, especially not in a country of such regional and ethnic diversity. And many political events have an unexpected impact on the fabric of society and the ecology of the land. To provide more contrasts and a deeper understanding of the variety of human responses to events, this history attempts to elaborate various epochs with contemporary quotations and illustrations of period art. It also provides asides in photo captions or boxed “close-ups” about everything from religious icons to the sacredness of corn, from the decipherment of ancient hieroglyphs to life in the capital during a military coup.

The close-ups also are intended to amplify the unusual backgrounds of some important individuals in politics. Just as often they give voice to those who are not usually represented in the official histories: a Spaniard preferring life in a Maya village to rejoining his fellow conquistadors; a poet choosing the nunnery over the viceregal court; a successful mulatto painter in a racist society. This history also uses the close-ups to overcome a tendency in Mexican histories to abandon the fate of the indigenous people a century after the Spanish conquest. The Indians become numbing statistics about impoverished peasants. Yet many native peoples (estimated to constitute 10 to 30 percent of the populace) have struggled to preserve to this day their separate cultural identity and ancient traditions. Their growing resurgence captured world attention in the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and forced an amendment to the Mexican constitution in 2001. A number of the close-ups spotlight their diverse methods of survival. Others follow the fortunes of some Mixtec Indians in Oaxaca through the centuries after the conquest to the present day.