

John Ross, “Pax Porfiriana, American Dream,” from The Annexation of Mexico (Boston: Common Courage Press, 1997)

The National Museum of Interventions is housed behind stolid stone walls on a shady Coyoacán street in the south of the capital. The site has long been one for worship: under the Aztecs’ domain, a temple of Huitzilopochtli stood here and the gunnels of the sacrificial wheels ran thick with the blood of local offerings. The convent of Churubusco became the headquarters for the National Guard during the invasion of ‘47—its defenders momentarily stopped the gringo army as it swept northwest towards Chapultepec Castle. Nearly a century and a half later, in 1981, riding the end of the oil boom, Jose’ López Portillo, a president with anti-imperialist pretensions, refurbished the historic old halls and christened the site the National Museum of Interventions.¹

The designation of the Museum was in keeping with the locale’s religious antecedents. Anti-interventionism is the bedrock of Mexican foreign policy and the bitter experience of repeated foreign invasion has elevated it to a near-religious principle. By “anti-interventionism,” Mexicans refer, almost exclusively, to U.S. intervention, and López Portillo’s museum did not at all amuse then-U.S. ambassador John Gavin.

Visitors to the museum’s 13 galleries tiptoe through airless, well-guarded rooms stuffed with flags and battle standards, old maps and cannons, muskets and ammunition chests and portraits of the perpetrators of, and resisters to, a century of intended annexations of Mexico. The interventions are meticulously charted on wall plaques. Between 1817 (when time begins for the Museum) and 1876, the first year of the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, interventions are recorded in 34 out of 59 years. During the first six years of the Díaz era, interventions occur every year. Then, for the next 29 years, between 1882 and 1911, the charts go blank—except for one incursion by the Arizona Rangers to quell a copper strike in 1906. Yet, despite the absence of invasion and intervention, the annexation of Mexico by the United States of North America became a fact of daily life during the three decades of and more of General Porfirio Díaz’s mandate.

“ORDER AND PROGRESS”

Two roughshod boys born into the sierra of Oaxaca dominated Mexican politics during the second half of the 19th century. Benito Juárez combined an inflexibly liberal vision of how Mexico should be governed with Indian persistence, as he rose from the Zapotec mountain town of Guegalatao to become, in turn, that rugged southern state’s governor, the chief justice of the supreme court, the framer of the nation’s Constitution, and, ultimately, Mexico’s president for a crucial make-or-break decade.

Porfirio Díaz's vision of the nation, on the other hand, was clouded by ruthless ambition. The mestizo son of marginal innkeepers from the state capital, 40 kilometers from Juarez's birthplace, Díaz was the Zapotec's cohort in the Ayutla revolution of '55 which finally toppled Santa Anna. His military skills were honed in the civil war and the young general's exploits during the resistance to the French were the stuff of legends—and an interminable telenovela, *The Flight of the Eagle*, broadcast nightly by the Televisa entertainment conglomerate at the zenith of Carlos Salinas's popularity. Salinas was often compared to Díaz by his critics.

After the French retreat in 1867, Díaz ushered President Juarez back into the capital, but three years later, when the Zapotec chose to ignore the very constitution he had devised and opted for reelection, the general turned against him. Exiled to his Oaxaca hacienda, Porfirio Díaz waited for his moment—which came after Juarez's death in 1872. Defeated once again in his bid for the presidency, Díaz launched an armed rebellion that engulfed Mexico in two more years of internecine bloodshed. Finally, in 1876, Porfirio Díaz emerged on top of the corpse heap and proclaimed himself President of Mexico.

Porfirio's position was a precarious one. The United States refused to recognize his government and Mexico seemed so unstable that it became a convenient target for the annexationists. President-elect Rutherford Hayes stoked up the war chant, seeking to deflect attention from his fraudulent 1876 election. On the morning of Hayes' inauguration, major newspapers in Washington, Philadelphia, and New York ran editorials that revived the "protectorate" concept of Mexican annexation.²

Constant scrapes agitated the borderlands between the two nations. Cattle rustlers like Richard King, founder of the King Ranch dynasty, zigzagged their stolen herds between Mexico and Texas with impunity.³ Apache bands, dislocated by America's march west, fled into Mexico and raided north into the U.S. When Hayes declared hot pursuit, Díaz resisted—today, "hot pursuit" (of trans-border drug traffickers) remains an equally incendiary topic for Mexican nationalists. Pragmatic as Santa Anna, Porfirio Díaz parlayed anti-gringo sentiment that continued to seethe south of the Rio Bravo into a popular mandate to become first provisional president and then the virtual dictator, for the next 34 years.

"Order & Progress," in that order, were the buzzwords with which Porfirio Díaz ran the show. After 60 years of bottomless carnage, the country hungered for order and Díaz dedicated his first years to establishing same. His model of governance was necessarily authoritarian: the President acted in the best interests of the Fatherland, the Congress approved the President's initiatives, and the Public was compliant because it, of course, understood that the President was acting in its best interests. Such a schema necessitated a large repressive force to maintain the stated order. Díaz retained the federal army in this capacity and created the rural police ("rurales") who adorned themselves like *charros* (ostentatious Mexican cowboys) and terrorized the countryside into

submission on behalf of large, urban-based, absentee landowners. At the grassroots, Díaz enlisted the allegiances of local *caciques* (rural bosses) and their private armies of gunsels (such armies survive in Chiapas today as *guardios blancas* or white guards) to keep the peace. Penal colonies were established in remote corners of the country, such as the Valle Nacional of Oaxaca, a malarial enclave where political prisoners performed slave labor on feudalistic tobacco export plantations. *Monterías* flourished in Chiapas's great untrammelled Lacandón jungle—rebellious Mayan Indians were rounded up and press-ganged to toil in the logging camps where the precious mahogany and cedar was clear-cut and shipped north to floor the great mansions of New York and London.⁵ Jails and lunatic asylums—both of which Díaz eventually sought to privatize (Wackenhutt proposes to do the same under Zedillo)—were filled to the brim.

The “Pax Porfiriano” promoted the image of stability. Díaz controlled the Mexican press with an iron hand and no mention of social disturbance was ever published. To burnish his international profile, the Dictator granted the Associated Press the wire monopoly on the proviso that he controlled what went out on it. The consistency of Díaz's rule eventually won the United States' admiration—the general himself served as president for 30 years, ceding the office only once, from 1880 to 1884, in accordance with Juárez's constitution, to his confidant, General Manuel Gonzalez. After '84, Díaz ordered a constitutional amendment to insure seven subsequent electoral victories. The Dictator's foreign minister, Ignacio Mariscal, matched his Jefe's longevity, serving 30 years. Matías Romero, who, as Juárez's foreign minister had been an architect of Mexico's new and improved relationship with the U.S., was ambassador to Washington for 16 years, until his death in 1898.

The “Progress” part of the Porfirian equation was delegated to the *Científicos* (the Scientists). The dictator, an unschooled military man, assembled this technocratic brain trust to promote economic “development.” Entranced by European and American science and technology, the *Científicos* advocated opening up Mexico to massive foreign investment in order to springboard the *Patria* out of dire poverty and into the 20th century—a policy not unlike one that would be entertained by Salinas a hundred years later. Everything was put up for sale. Romero was reported to keep a “blue book” on his Washington desk, listing available concessions with the dollar prices affixed to them.⁶

The *Científicos* were Social Darwinists with a predatory understanding of the nation. “The weak, the unprepared, those who lack the necessary tools to triumph in the evolutionary process, must perish and leave the field to the strongest,” the elegant Jose Ives Limantour told the National Science Conference in 1901.⁷ Such racist attitudes (read “white” for “strong”) did not presage relief for most Mexicans (about 98% of the population) upon whom the renovating drops of first world science and technology would never rain.

“So close to the United States”

From the outset of his eight presidencies, there is evidence that Porfirio Díaz, who had experienced the annexation of half of Mexico in *carne proprio* (his “own flesh”) understood the dangers of having a ten-million-ton U.S. gorilla sitting on his northern border: the axiom “Poor Mexico, so close to the United States and so far from God” may be the Dictator’s most lasting contribution to Mexican nationalist thought. Throughout his long rule, Díaz sought to counterbalance the threat of U.S. annexation by courting European investors.

Despite the gross insult the Maximilian escapade had inflicted upon national honor, diplomatic relations were reestablished with France, which came to own 21% of all mining interests in Mexico.⁸ The French founded the National Bank, built textile factories, opened department stores and set the Porfirian style—Díaz even had the Paseo de la Reforma remodeled to resemble the Champs-Elysees. Frenchified mansions lined the neighborhoods running off the boulevard and interior decoration was just as frilly. Comic Opera became a favorite entertainment of the elite.

The Germans too were invited to invest and bought mineral rights in the northern Sierra Madre and settled Chiapas’s Soconusco on the Guatemalan border, where they still retain huge coffee plantations. Germans dug mines and built breweries and played their accordions, from which has evolved the popular, rollicking “Norteño” music of the U.S.-Mexican border.

British bankers and traders ruled the world and Latin America was no exception—the Anglos were granted concessions to run electric power companies, the Mexico City tram system, and 4,500 miles of railroad.⁹ Díaz contracted Weetman Pearson, later First Viscount Cowdry, to build Puerto Mexico (now the port of Coatzacoalcos), designed exclusively for European clients. Between 1885 and 1910, British entrepreneurs opened 210 mines in Mexico.¹⁰ Pearson brought in Mexico’s first oil gusher. But, despite the deluge of concessions to assorted European investors, Díaz was never able to neutralize the U.S. gorilla.

Then, as now, the United States dominated investment in Mexico—55% of the total boodle. The Land of the Aztecs was the only one on the continent in which the U.S. share of the market outstripped that of the Brits. So extensive were British holdings in the late 19th century that they actually owned nearly a billion-dollar share of the United States itself.¹¹

Famous American fortunes were made in Porfirian Mexico. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil bought in on the ground floor of petroleum development. The refined, art-loving Guggenheims befouled the air of El Paso-Juarez with their ASARCO refinery for a century. J.P. Morgan established banks and annexed great swatches of Mexican countryside with greenbacks. Railroad tycoon Jay Gould hooked up with Ulysses Grant,

but went broke on the Mexican Southern Railroad to Díaz's home state of Oaxaca. The Hearsts claimed enormous tracts of Mexican forest lands in the Chimilapas on the Oaxacan Isthmus and the Tarahumara Sierra of Chihuahua.

The volume of business U.S. entrepreneurs were doing in Mexico jumped 14 times during Díaz's immense tenure—from \$9 million in 1870 to \$36 million by 1890 to \$117 million in 1910.¹² The U.S. dominated commercial trade, with 51% of the market (the British had only a 17% piece). By 1910, the Dictator's final year in office, the United States had a total \$646 million USD investment in the continuing stability of the Mexican economy.¹⁴

THE ENGINE OF ANNEXATION

The railroad was the engine with which Díaz opened Mexican resources to global exploitation. It also helped Don Porfirio rush troops into back country hotspots whenever the natives got too restless. Díaz never tired of pointing out that when he came to power in the putsch of '76, Mexico had only 200 miles of track (concessed by Juarez, also a true believer in the future of rail travel); when the Dictator was finally forced to flee to Europe, 12,000 miles of railway knitted the nation together.

The biggest giveaway came in 1880, just three months before Díaz deferred to Gonzalez: the Mexican Central and the Mexican National, routes that would link the capital with the border at El Paso-Juarez and the two Laredos, were concessed to a Boston combine, represented by rail baron Hiram Nickerson, owner of the Atchison (later the Santa Fe). E.H. Harriman and Brown Brothers would soon be in on the deal. The two concessions "were to seal the fate of Mexico to that of the United States," writes JoseYina Zoraida Vazquez. "Ever since, the Mexican economy has been complementary."¹⁵ If this distinguished historian's analysis holds water, the U.S. annexation of Mexico, begun as a gleam in Franklin's and Jefferson's and Monroe's eyes, and carried all the way to the Halls of Motecuhzoma by Scott's Army in '47, became, under Porfirio Díaz's hard hand, a palpable reality from which Mexico would never ever escape.

To be certain, Díaz tried to rectify the advantage he had given U.S. investors. Pearson got the Veracruz-to-Mexico City route ("Every turn associated with the thrilling history of the Conquest" read a contemporary travel brochure).¹⁶ The soon-to-be Lord Cowdry finally built the Tehuantepec line—Hawaiian sugar was now unloaded at Salina Cruz, stacked on Pearson's flat cars and hauled over the hump of the Isthmus for reloading at Puerto Mexico, upon ships bound for Philadelphia. Díaz had lured Pearson from building tunnels under New York's East River to dig Mexico City's Profound Drainage System: "an eternal pedestal and glory of our country," the Dictator waxed grandiose at the inauguration of the new sewer system.¹⁷ Weetman Pearson

enjoyed vast holdings all over Porfirian Mexico, ranging from a burlap bag factory to electricity generating plants (Mexican Light and Power) to his several rail lines, to the Eagle (*El Aguila*) Petroleum Company.

British and American-owned rail companies imported their own workers and English was the official language of the roads. Orders were given in the gringo tongue, which much galled the Mexican peons hired to lay the tracks. One of Francisco Madero's first acts of state after the Dictator's downfall was to reestablish Spanish as the language on the railroads. Today, the stiff British presence on the Veracruz-Mexico City line is still burlesqued in Tlaxcala country towns like Contla where young couples, dolled up in tophats, frock coats, long skirts, and parasols, cavort in wild Indian dances at Carnival time.¹⁸

“THE MOSES AND THE JOSHUA OF HIS PEOPLE”

Annexation is primarily a territorial thrust. The U.S., which had been repeatedly foiled in its bid to annex Sonora and Baja California, simply obtained what it could not get by conquest via government concessions. Between 1882 and 1895, 70 million acres of Mexican real estate fell into foreign hands—by 1910, the acreage had soared to 134 million.¹⁹ The International Corporation of Mexico, headed by Michigan attorney George Sisson and German immigrant investor Lewis Husser, snapped up 14.6 million acres of Sonora (the Yaquis had to be subdued before they could move in), Baja California, two Pacific Coast islands, and 340,000 acres in Chiapas. Edward Doheny, the California oil magnate, bought 620,000 acres in the Poza Rica region. Pearson received 800,000 acres for his *Aguila* Oil company in the Tampico-Tuxpán corridor. The Mexican Land & Colonization Company, a joint venture between J.P. Morgan and several members of the British House of Lords, purchased 3,000,000 acres in Chiapas and Baja's San Quintín Valley (now leased to transnational tomato growers).

In southern Mexico, U.S. and British speculators dominated export agricultural production—*henequen* (sisal) from the Yucatan, rubber (Pearson had a 300,000-tree plantation), chicle, precious hardwoods and coffee from Chiapas. Up north, the great Hearst ranch in Chihuahua abutted the Creel-Terrazas holdings. Together they were larger than the kingdom of Belgium.

What was under the land was annexable as well. Between 1884 and 1898, the mining law was altered four times to give foreign investors incentive to dig. The mines were often remote enclaves of foreigners, serviced by costly rail lines built by the owners to haul out prime material. El Oro Mine & Railroad Company, north of Mexico City, a joint British-U.S.-French-German venture, featured its own golf course and polo field. Spurred by Díaz's concessions, subsidies and low tariffs, Mexico recaptured world leadership in silver production. Gold output rose from one million pesos in 1877 to 40 million in 1911, and black gold gushed along the northern Veracruz coast, propelling Mexico to seventh place on the global production charts. Rockefeller's Standard, Pierce

Oil, and Royal Dutch were players but the two giants, Doheny and Pearson, dominated the burgeoning industry, bringing in major strikes at a moment in history when the world's great economies would take a qualitative leap by converting to petroleum to power commercial production.

Annexation by concession was excellent for business. Under the Díaz dictatorship, Mexico's Gross National Product grew 380%.¹⁰ Díaz paid off the foreign debt for the first time ever—one of his first acts as president was to settle outstanding reclamations with the U.S. By the turn of the century, Mexico was running its first trade surplus since the Conquest. Porfirio's *Científicos* had no trouble obtaining long credit lines from the world financial community. Like Carlos Salinas a century later, Porfirio Díaz was eulogized by the captains of international capitalism: "He is the Moses and the Joshua of his people," trumpeted Andrew Carnegie.²¹ The Anglo-American Mining Guide compared the general to "Alexander, the Caesars, William the Norman, the Great Napoleon..."

THINGS FALL APART

While the macro of the Mexican economy boomed under Díaz's firm hand, the micro fell apart. There was and is no trickle-down in the Mexican class structure, as the extraordinary historian Daniel Cosío Villegas explains: "The idea [of trickle-down], largely confirmed by the experience of the United States and England, was inoperative in Mexico for two good reasons—first, Mexico's social pyramid was not tall with a narrow base so that fertilizing waters drained down an almost vertical slope. In Mexico, the pyramid was squat, with a very broad base, so that the flow was slow and almost horizontal. Moreover, separating each of the three levels was a thick, impenetrable slab that caused rainfall to stagnate on the crest with little or no flow below."²³

At the tip of the pyramid were the neighborhoods running off Reforma where the mansions sported French maids and British butlers and the residents wore bowler hats and carried parasols and played at croquet. It was where the white-haired, walrus-mustachioed Díaz lived and, as he grew older, the only world he ever saw as he drove each day to the National Palace, his chest blazing with medals like some European archduke in exile.

But just outside this walled, well-policed precinct, most of Mexico was sinking in dire poverty. In the capital's slum barrios the average life span was 24 years (it was 45 in Paris). 43 out of 1,000 adults died each year (compared to six in a not very spick-and-span London), making Mexico City the most insalubrious urban center on the planet. 50% of all babies born did not survive their first year.²⁴

Misery in the city was matched by gnawing hunger in the countryside, where 80% of the population was still tied to agricultural production—although less than 3% of Mexicans owned land. 7,000,000 Indians and Mestizos were bound to 834 haciendas and land development corporations.²⁵ Rural wages in 1910 were 35 centavos a day, precisely the same as they had been in 1810 when Padre Hidalgo rang the church bells and yelled “*Viva Mexico!*” (Let’s go kill some Gachupines!)²⁶ Indeed, the Mexico that lived outside of Díaz’s dream world was no better off than it had been at Independence a century before— and now those same bedraggled Mexicans watched helplessly as the independence won by Hidalgo and Morelos and Guerrero and all their subsequent martyrs was sold off inch by inch to the despised gringos.

The bad gas seeped in in stages. The 1907 worldwide economic downturn wreaked havoc in Porfirian Mexico—*henequen* prices plummeted, copper collapsed, and the textile market disintegrated. In May, panicked banks called in all loans and the Guggenheims shut down their smelters. “The panic of 1907 was most trying. No one escaped from it, great or small,” wrote John D. Rockefeller.

Labor troubles spilled over. In May, 1906, the Díaz governor in Sonora gave the green light for Arizona Rangers to cross the border to repress a miners’ strike at Colonel William Greene’s great Cananea copper pit—a score of Mexican workers were slain. Washington, fretting that the strike had been ignited by IWW (Wobbly) agitators, offered to send backup troops.

In June 1907, 6,000 striking textile workers at Rio Blanco, Veracruz were beaten and gunned down by the rural police. John Kenneth Turner reported between 200 and 800 dead—their bodies stacked on flatcars and fed to the sharks in Veracruz port.²⁸ Both incidents sparked the cohesion of the Mexican labor movement. Work stoppages on the railroads all the way from Chihuahua to Mexico City moved the Díaz government to merge the British and U.S. rail lines into one system—the creation of the National Railroad Corporation irritated Díaz’s foreign associates. Although the corporation’s board of directors sat in New York where Harriman could keep an eye on them, the Mexican government retained 51% of the stock in the new enterprise. Such behavior was strangely out of character for Washington’s old associate.

In 1908, the Dictator confirmed what had already been rumored in Washington. In an interview with James Creelman, of *Pearson’s Magazine*, Díaz, then 78, announced he would not be a candidate in the 1910 presidential election and would “welcome an opposition party in Mexico.”²⁹ The Creelman interview was soon on the front page of Mexican newspapers and encouraged a power struggle for succession between Secretary of Finance Limantour and Secretary of War General Benjamin Reyes. Díaz became so enraged at the vulture-like antics of his underlings that he withdrew his pledge of never running for the presidency again, and declared himself a candidate for one more term.

Despite the Dictator's backstepping, the Creelman interview had excited the nation's long-quiet political opposition. Galvanized by the circulation of the Flores Magon brothers' *Regeneration*, 5,000 Liberal clubs blossomed in Mexico between 1908 and 1910.³⁰ But while the middle class organized itself, the dispossessed continued to stew in abject poverty. It would take a few more years of social disintegration for their fury to fully explode into the first great social revolution of the 20th century.

MADERO'S MICROBE

The most significant challenger to Díaz's long-lived rule came from an unlikely direction—Francisco Madero, the scion of Coahuila *hacenderos* who had reaped their fortunes in export agriculture, copper mines and steel and textile mills during the Porfiriato. A diminutive vegetarian, practicing spiritualist, and Lenin look-alike, Madero had studied abroad at Berkeley and in Paris and had returned to his homeland brimming with democratic fervor. Barnstorming the land on the Anti-Re-election ticket and in defense of Juárez's 1867 constitution, Madero triggered the lingering discontent of the bourgeoisie, increasingly cut out of the action by Díaz's encrusted old guard. Although the little man himself characterized his chances as those of "a microbe against an elephant,"³¹ the pachyderm was soon infected as years of repressed political frustrations coalesced around Don Porfirio.

The dictator responded by clapping Madero and 5,000 supporters in jail. The June 21st, 1910 election was as bogus as all those that had come before (and would come afterwards, too) and the 80-year-old dictator was returned to the presidency by a stunning margin.

To celebrate his "triumph," Don Porfirio programmed a splendiferous celebration of Mexico's 100th year of independence in September of that year. The budget for the gala affair equaled the nation's education outlay for 1910 and poor people were energetically discouraged from attending the festivities, exacerbating unrest.

Díaz's downward spiral had just begun. Madero bribed his way out of San Luis Potosi prison and, fleeing to Texas (as the Dictator himself had done 35 years earlier), he called for Mexicans to gather in the plazas of their towns and cities on November 20th, 1910 at 4:00 in the afternoon and rise up in rebellion. Few dared. But the aging Díaz, exhausted at the prospect of having to beat off Madero's challenge, had little fight left in him.

"THE WILD BEASTS ARE LOOSED"

Idols crumble fast when they finally begin to fall here—perhaps it is the climate. The nose-dive of Carlos Salinas, who outdid Díaz by selling off the nation's banks, highways, airlines and public utilities, and privatizing agriculture in only one sixth the time it took the Dictator to do so, is a contemporary case in

point. Salinas's image as the new Redeemer of Mexico collapsed just three weeks after he left power in December 1994 as peso devaluation set off a chain reaction that started the nation on the deepest economic slide since the Great Depression. Today, *ambulantes* (itinerant street vendors) brave Reforma Boulevard traffic to hawk comic latex heads of the self-exiled ex-president. Like Santa Anna's leg, Salinas's head is passed from hand to hand and scorned on the streets of the capital.

The Dictator's own head took a few months longer to fall. Madero's grito was heard south of Mexico City in Morelos state where Emiliano Zapata mounted first his horse and then an army of campesinos to punch up Díaz's "*federates*," Achilles Serdciu formulated conspiracies in Puebla. Doroteo Arango, aka Francisco Villa, an alleged bandit, and Pascual Orozco, said to be a mule skinner, harkened to the call in Chihuahua. In Sonora, Alvaro Obregón, a garbanzo-bean farmer, threw his lot in with the rebels. Appointed by Madero as Governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza assembled an Anti-Re-Election army. Spurred on by Villa, a wily tactician who transported his fabled "*División del Norte*" on Díaz's crackerjack railroads, the rebels took the border at Juarez and headed south to where Zapata was already laying waste to the federal army. The old man, weary of defending the indefensible, threw in the towel fast. Less than six months had elapsed since Madero's revolution had begun.

The dictator's pretext for abdication was prescient: he was stepping down to avoid "international conflict,"³² i.e., U.S. intervention, always a scenario at moments of Mexican turmoil. Leaving his Washington ambassador Francisco Leon de Ibarra behind as a caretaker president, the old man hobbled up the gangplank of the *Ypiranga* and sailed off to Paris with one last warning to those for whom he had governed so long: "The wild beasts have been loosed. Now let us see who can cage them..."³³