

Mexico—The Essentials



WILLIAM H. BEEZLEY

and

COLIN M. MACLACHLAN

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CONSERVATIVE DECLINE AND LIBERALISM ASCENDANT

The US–Mexican War traumatized the nation's leaders. Conservatives, convinced that only a monarch could repair the damage and prevent further territorial losses, tried to identify a European prince willing to govern. In the interim, Lucas Alamán planned a transitional proto-monarchy. He chose Santa Anna, then in exile in Long Island, New York, to form the new government. Alamán's sudden death left Santa Anna without restraint, and he quickly designed a lavish green-and-gold-decorated royal court with bodyguards done up in blonde Parisian hair and beard wigs. His indulgences soon led to a revolt in Acapulco by Liberals, called the Revolution of Ayutla. Santa Anna led troops to crush the rebels, but failed. He fled to Veracruz, onto the Virgin Islands, and a final exile in Venezuela. He returned to Mexico unnoticed in 1876.

Liberals took the abandoned presidency. They undid Santa Anna's expenditures, encouraged European immigration, and, in 1856 and 1857, issued three laws that had a direct impact on the Church's functions in civil society. The Iglesias law required civil registries recording marriages, births, and deaths, and transferred supervision of cemeteries to civil authorities. The Juárez Law suppressed separate Church and military courts, except for issues of internal discipline, to establish equality before the law. The Lerdo Law ordered that the properties held

by corporations, including both the Church and Indian communities, be sold to individuals. The Liberals believed that private ownership would spur development and productivity. These laws formed the backbone of a new constitution, completed in 1857, designed to create a modern, secular nation.

Hostile Church officials urged military officers to seize power. The War of the Reform became nasty, cruel, and vicious as the country turned against itself in frustration. Avoiding the Conservative forces, Benito Juárez, who had succeeded to the presidency, fled to Guanajuato and then to the Liberal stronghold of Veracruz, where he could draw on customs revenues to support his makeshift government. Both sides borrowed foreign money at ruinous interest rates. The most notorious debt, the Jecker loan, provided the Conservatives with minimal funds for 15 million pesos of debt. A defiant Juárez declared religious toleration in the midst of the war (1860). Eventually the Liberal army defeated the Conservatives and claimed a shattered and bankrupt nation on New Year's Day, 1861.

The Liberals pressed to restore order and prevent government bankruptcy by suspending payments on the international debts. Juárez, in triumph, pressed to create a secular society. The Congress ordered that anyone buying or selling real estate, recording births, deaths, and marriages in the public registry, graduating from the university, or transacting business with the government must swear allegiance to the 1857 Constitution. Pope Pius IX ordered excommunication for those who accepted the constitution. His action received the support of Conservatives who had grown up in political violence that inspired nostalgia for an imagined tranquil colonial past. With renewed defiance encouraged by the Vatican, they renewed their struggle with the resilient hope of a monarchy.

NAPOLEON III'S MEXICAN ADVENTURE

Conservative dreams merged with those of Napoleon III of France, who envisioned a grand coalition of peoples who once had been united under Rome (those that spoke languages derived from Latin) and their former colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Spurred by ambition, Napoleon III joined with Conservatives and soon plunged Mexico into yet another internal war.

The Juárez government both suspected debt payments and refused to recognize loans to the Conservatives, including the Jecker contract taken over by the French government. This provided a justification for Napoleon, who called on the governments of Great Britain and Spain to join in the blockade of Veracruz. London and Madrid sent ships to the port city, but departed in anger when they learned the French emperor's actual intentions. He had decided, in concert with Conservatives, to occupy Mexico and establish a client monarch. He chose Maximilian, the younger brother of the emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Charlotte (hispanized as Carlota), the daughter of the king of Belgium, as the emperor and empress of Mexico.

In January 1862, the French invasion force of 30,000, commanded by General Élie Frédéric Forey, disembarked, confident they would brush aside defenders

and occupy the capital. French troops encountered little resistance until they arrived at Puebla, known as the nation's most conservative city, where they expected to be greeted as saviors. Liberal defenders, commanded by Texas-born General Ignacio Zaragoza, had little hope of victory. Mexican artillery checked the invaders until Porfirio Díaz led an infantry brigade that turned the flank of the stunned French, who scattered in retreat. This victory on *Cinco de Mayo* (May 5, 1862) remains a national holiday. A year later, the reinforced French army forced the unconditional surrender of Puebla and marched on to Mexico City. The Juárez government retreated to the north and survived only by constant movement from one town to another ahead of the enemy.

The new royal couple arrived with good intentions. Conservatives and Church officials anticipated immediate elimination of the Liberal reforms, but Maximilian declared publically he intended to ratify the Liberal reform laws and guarantee individual rights. The stunned Church and Conservatives discovered they had conspired to place a Liberal on the throne.

Maximilian's plans faced the dogged resistance of Juárez. French troops controlled the country's core, Maximilian's situation grew unstable as the US Civil War ended, and the Lincoln government pressed for a French withdrawal from Mexico. Napoleon also felt threatened by the rise of Prussia. He decided to end his Mexican adventure and ordered the troops home. Carlota went to France and the Vatican, but received no assistance. She suffered a mental breakdown and was placed in a castle in Belgium. Abandoned, Maximilian, after some soul searching, stayed, took command of his troops at Queretaro, and was captured by Juárez's soldiers. Despite worldwide appeals from politicians such as Abraham Lincoln and intellectuals such as Victor Hugo, Juárez refused to pardon the one-time emperor. A firing squad executed Maximilian and his two top generals on June 19, 1867 (see Fig. 2.2).

THE LIBERALS RETURN

Juárez returned to Mexico City determined to separate the Church from civil society and modernize the nation, especially the countryside, as a defense against foreigners. His impatient reinforcement of the Lerdo Law provoked agrarian unrest between 1868 and 1870 from the center south to Tehuantepec and Campeche and Tabasco. Additional challenges to rural programs came from the anarchism introduced by European radicals in Schools of Enlightenment and Socialism established in the countryside. One such school in Chalco, inspired Julio Chávez López, an Indian, who organized a revolt. The Liberals defeated his largely indigenous army and executed him on the orders of President Juárez.

The government also reacted to the endemic bandits who attacked travelers, stage lines, and the new railroads. President Juárez created a constabulary, called the *Rurales*, to end the epidemic of bandits. The Rurales enforced order with little attention to laws or forbearance, leaving many they apprehended hanging from tree limbs as a warning to others.

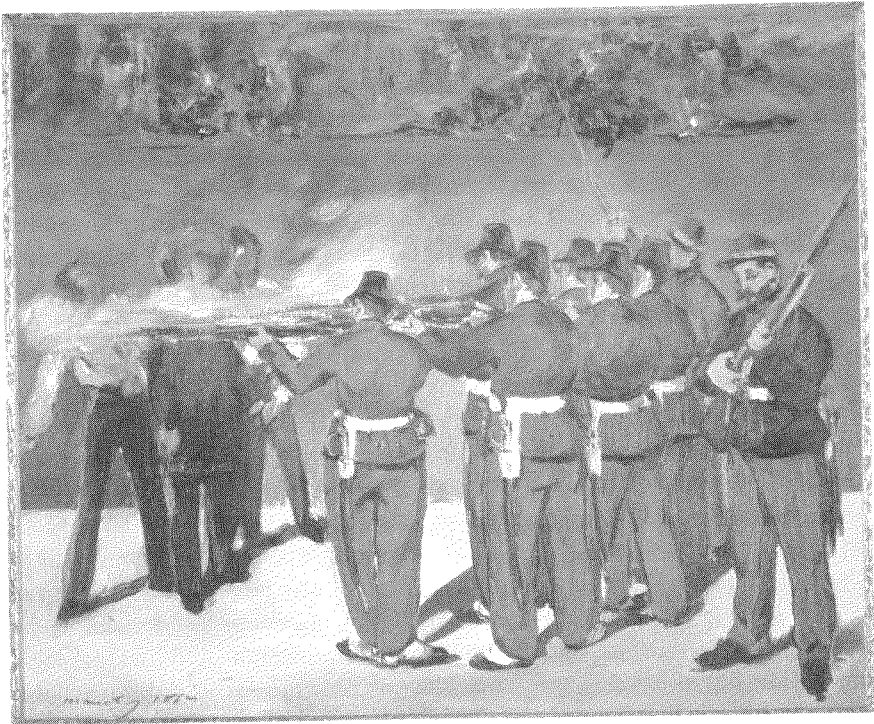


Figure 2.2 Manet's Execution of Maximilian.

Juárez's practical solutions to national development received philosophical support from the positivist ideas of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who had grown up in the confusion that followed the French Revolution. Gabino Barreda popularized Comtian precepts after he studied medicine in Paris, had personal contact with the philosopher, and became a charter member of the Société Positiviste in 1848. The popular perception of the philosophy appeared to match the Mexican situation. Barreda in 1867 organized the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria that enrolled 900 students the following year. The prep school educated the generation who later staffed the Porfirian government.

Meanwhile, Juárez died a few months after winning reelection in 1872. A new manipulated election gave the presidency to Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada. Lerdo expanded anti-clericalism with a prohibition against wearing clerical robes in public and restrictions on public religious displays, and he initiated several developmental programs, but resisted the idea of railroad connections to the United States. The 1876 elections between the incumbent and General Porfirio Díaz, resulted in another term for Lerdo. Díaz, demanding effective suffrage and no reelection, revolted, succeeded in overthrowing the president, and claimed the capital on November 23, 1876.