

A  
GLORIOUS  
DEFEAT

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MEXICO AND ITS WAR WITH  
THE UNITED STATES

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HILL AND WANG

A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
New York



# MEXICO

circa 1824

Adams-Onís Treaty Line

UPPER CALIFORNIA  
TERRITORY

Boundary claimed by Texas and  
the United States (1836-46)

NEW MEXICO  
TERRITORY

Disputed  
Territory

Boundary of  
The Louisiana Purchase  
(1803)

Mississippi R.

Red R.  
Sabine R.  
Nueces R.

COAHUILA AND TEXAS

San Antonio

Boundary claimed  
by Mexico (1835)

TERRITORY OF  
BUJA CALIFORNIA

SONORA Y SINALOA

CHIHUAHUA

DURANGO

ZACATECAS

NUÉVO  
LEÓN

TAMATEPEC

SAN LUIS POTOSÍ

GUANAJUATO

JALISCO

MEXICO CITY

MICHOACÁN

MÉXICO

PUEBLA

QUERÉTARO

VERACRUZ

TLAXCALA

TLASCALA

GUERRERO

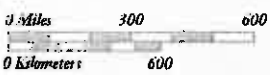
OAXACA

CHIAPAS

YUCATAN

Gulf of Mexico

Pacific Ocean



Few in British North America boasted titles of rank that set them much above their fellows. In contrast to the stuffy elitism of the Old World, lineage was of scant concern to the Anglo-Americans. People enjoyed differing levels of wealth and power, of course, but in general the poor in America were less poor than their Old World counterparts, and the rich were less rich. "No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there," wrote Tocqueville in the 1830s, "than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society."<sup>2</sup>

Anglo-Americans tended also to believe that universal education not only inculcated the values of good citizenship but also aided economic growth and therefore should be universally available. In the early nineteenth century education was fast becoming available to all white, and even to a few black, Americans. By the 1830s the United States was among the world's most literate societies. Many Mexican leaders shared the sense that public education was vital to social health, but they encountered formidable obstacles to implementing successful educational programs, and the overwhelming majority of Mexicans remained illiterate throughout the nineteenth century.

Of course, in the United States slaves, Indians, and indentured servants were not held to be "equal" to free white Americans, and they did not enjoy citizenship rights. The enslavement of blacks and the dispossession of Indians were glaring exceptions to nearly every principle that U.S. elites claimed to hold dear, and these original sins would nearly capsize the republican experiment. That crisis, however, remained decades away. Indentured servants, at least, would gain freedom upon fulfilling their contracts, whereupon they merged into a free white population that afforded most of

them considerable opportunity. Anglo-Americans scarcely entertained the idea that Indians and blacks should enjoy full citizenship rights and so believed that their interests could blithely be ignored. The politically engaged people of the United States were ethnically homogeneous. In the first decades after independence American leaders seldom tired of pointing out, with inordinate pride, that theirs was a republic of white men.

Mexico's social makeup was far more complicated and muddled than that of the United States, its past more violent and traumatic. Modern Mexico was born in 1521 amid the spectacular violence of the Conquest, where Spanish adventurers led by the intrepid conquistador Hernán Cortés laid waste to the opulent Aztec Empire, which claimed several million subjects. The capital of that empire, Tenochtitlán, was an engineering marvel, home to some two or three hundred thousand people, more than lived in contemporary Madrid or Paris. That great city was reduced to a stinking rubble after a months-long battle. The horror and devastation of the conquest was followed by a veritable holocaust for the native population: over the ensuing decades millions of Mexico's indigenous people perished from overwork and abuse and waves of epidemic Old World disease to which they had no immunity. Even so, the indigenous population was too large and stubborn to be eradicated or removed, so the Spaniards and Indians reached certain accommodations. Spaniards were heirs to a tradition wherein the conquered were made to serve the conquerors, which fit well with their plans and culture. Spanish gentlemen eschewed manual labor, but there was plenty of manual labor to be done—in the fields, in the mines, in the carrying trades. Simply put, nonwhites became the working classes of colonial Mexico, since white skin was all it took to elevate a man to the status of New World nobility.

For all their brutality and callousness, in fact the Spaniards

were great innovators in the area of race relations. They were arguably the first people to seriously ponder the implications of intercultural contact on a vast scale. Yet while learned clerics at Spain's universities debated the worth of the Indian race, their counterparts, the bold missionaries to the New World, were busy carrying out an experiment in social engineering that, although done with compassionate intentions, had unfortunate consequences that are still felt today. They deemed the native peoples of America to be perpetual children, fledglings whose tender wings would never permit them to leave the nest. Accordingly, they designed a paternalistic regime full of special protections and a few onerous requirements, one that inculcated dependence and a fair degree of isolation from white society. Indians held certain inalienable communal lands, lived in semiautonomous villages, had law courts designed specifically to hear their charges and complaints, were not permitted to carry guns or swords, could not enter the priesthood or other professions, were not permitted to borrow more than five pesos, and were required to pay a race-based head tax. Relying on such blatant paternalism, the friars hoped to protect the Indians as far as possible from the corrupting influence of white civilization.

In some ways they succeeded all too well. Indians lived in self-governing villages; most did not learn Spanish or adopt many Spanish ways; they were able to preserve many of their pre-Columbian beliefs and practices, albeit in somewhat distorted forms; they remained, for the most part, desperately poor and outside the market economy; and their interactions with people from outside their culture were limited and characteristically hostile. All of this remained largely true as Mexico entered the nineteenth century and the era of its independent existence. Policymakers in Mexico thus confronted obstacles that their neighbors to the north did not. The Indians, who accounted for perhaps about 60 percent of the population, were unassimilated, illiterate, and unable to

speak what white elites deemed to be the national language. One writer at the time of the U.S.-Mexican War reckoned that perhaps three-quarters of Mexico's indigenous population had not yet heard the news of Mexico's independence from Spain.

Some 22 percent of Mexico's population consisted of *castas*, a generic term for people of mixed race. The conquistador Hernán Cortés himself had helped kick off this trend by fathering an illegitimate son by his Indian interpreter, Doña Marina (better known to history as La Malinche). Other conquistadors and early settlers followed suit, bringing into being a class of *mestizos*, persons of mixed Indian and European blood. Adding to the racial mix were enslaved Africans, brought to work in the mines and on sugar plantations. Blacks, in turn, produced offspring with Indians and whites. (In Mexico such offspring were called *zambos* and *mulattos* respectively.) In a country that was in theory sharply divided by race—there was a “Republic of Spaniards” and a “Republic of Indians”—the *castas* fit into no officially recognized category. For the three hundred years of the Spanish colony, they inhabited the uncomfortable margins of society, with few opportunities for advancement. Only one institute of higher learning in all of Mexico admitted *castas*, the undistinguished Colegio de San Juan de Letrán, where the meager curriculum included courses in how to beg for alms.

Not surprisingly, *castas* tended toward fairly menial occupations: they became artisans, muleteers, hacienda overseers, domestic servants, and market vendors. The more they tried to gain respect and social standing, the more the whites insisted on their own racial “purity.” In the late colonial era whites took to devising rather bizarre new racial designations based on the intricate intermingling of white, Indian, and African blood. The closer those mixtures came to whiteness, the more respectable they became, but it was never quite possible to erase the stain of nonwhite blood in the eyes of the

white elite. By the time of Mexico's independence, castas were the fastest-growing element of the Mexican population, yet their status remained oddly undetermined. Their pretensions to power and respect would provoke some of the most gruesome episodes in the history of the early Mexican Republic.

Mexico's racial situation, then, was a good deal more complex than that of the United States. There was one blessing: by the end of the colonial era Mexico had relatively few enslaved blacks (some eight thousand, perhaps), most of them concentrated in the torrid coastal regions. The institution of slavery was entirely negligible to Mexico's economy. Mexico therefore was able to suppress that institution with relative ease, affording it one of its few advantages over its northern neighbor.

This single blessing, however, did not make Mexico's racial sins any less damning than those of the United States. The Indians and the castas suffered grotesque marginalization and poverty. Nineteenth-century visitors to Mexico City, who arrived expecting to experience the fabled elegance of the old colonial capital, were inevitably scandalized by the sight of thousands of dark-skinned people living out of doors and in the most appalling squalor: clad in dirty rags, covered with frightful sores and wounds, living from crime or begging. The well-to-do residents of the capital developed a colorful lexicon of disparaging terms to describe these despised people: *los léperos*, *la canalla*, *los sansculottes*, *la chusma*, *el populacho*—all translating, with varying shades of emphasis, to “the rabble.” Brantz Mayer, who served as secretary of the U.S. legation in Mexico during the 1840s, left a vivid portrait of the famed Mexican *lépero*, with his long, vermin-infested hair, torn and stinking clothing, wild eyes, and “features pinched by famine into sharpness.” Such people spent their days around the markets and shops that sold pulque—the fermented juice of the century plant that was the intoxicant of choice among Mexico's poor—“feeding on fragments, quar-

reling, drinking, stealing and lying drunk about the pavements, with their children crying with hunger around them.”<sup>3</sup>

The relatively better-off working people of the city—who were mostly mestizo and were generally included in the category of “rabble”—tended to live in first-floor apartments that routinely flooded during the rainy season, contributing to a shockingly high mortality rate. Children under the age of three accounted for a third of all deaths in the city. In the countryside famine was a recurring nightmare, as were periodic epidemics of smallpox and *matlazahuatl*, a disease resembling smallpox that affected Mexico's Indian population exclusively. Some estimates place Mexico's illiteracy rate as high as 99 percent. Where Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed with the overwhelming equality he found in the United States, another European traveler, the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, found the opposite in Mexico. He described it with brutal simplicity: “Mexico is the country of inequality. Nowhere does there exist such a fearful difference in the distribution of fortune, civilization, cultivation of the soil and population.”<sup>4</sup>

middle ground between the two sides gradually evaporated, leaving an almost unbridgeable chasm.

Still, if some Mexicans saw the church as an obstacle to progress, even many who criticized the church were in no hurry to accept religious toleration. Whereas in the United States a spirit of genuine nationalism—that is, a sincere devotion to the country and its ideals—grew steadily during the early decades of the nineteenth century, in Mexico relatively few had much sense of nationhood or allegiance to the country's central government. Under such circumstances religion seemed the only available substitute for patriotism. According to the leading conservative of the epoch, Lucas Alamán, religion provided the “only common link which binds all Mexicans, when all the rest have been broken.”<sup>6</sup> Without the unifying and civilizing influence of the church, many assumed, Mexico's masses would give themselves over entirely to barbarism, and society would be plunged headlong into the direst anarchy. Before 1860 all Mexican law deemed Roman Catholicism to be the official religion, without tolerance of any other. Religious intolerance, in turn, stifled creativity and initiative, discouraged immigration, and contributed to Mexico's backwardness.