

Despite a host of misgivings, when elections were held in March 1833, Santa Anna was the resounding victor.

Although Santa Anna was a veteran of political intrigue, this was his first stint as president. He would go on to serve as president of the republic on ten more occasions, and he wielded considerable power even when he did not occupy the presidency. He was undoubtedly the most important Mexican political figure of his day. His tremendous influence and longevity have long presented historians with a conundrum. Santa Anna's flaws were numerous and widely acknowledged, even during his own time. Mexicans ever since have blamed him for many, if not most, of the misfortunes their country suffered during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He gave his contemporaries every conceivable cause to mistrust him, for he betrayed every constituency that ever rallied on his behalf. It is therefore somewhat difficult to explain why the Mexicans—including men of clear integrity and intelligence—solicited his services again and again, convinced that he represented the country's best, and perhaps only, hope.

There are several explanations for Santa Anna's enduring appeal, none of them entirely satisfying. In fact, although he was vain, corrupt, incompetent, and untrustworthy, Santa Anna boasted a number of qualities that helped to make him the indispensable man of his generation. Specifically, he was cruel, addicted to risk, rich, geographically well situated, ideologically mutable, and charismatic.

They assured Santa Anna of a solid regional power base. Santa Anna closely fit the mold of the caudillo, a common enough character in nineteenth-century Latin America. Caudillos were men who managed to build regional power through deft combinations of kinship, charisma, patronage, shrewd understanding of the common folk, and control of strategic resources. In accordance with this pattern, Santa Anna was able to pack the civilian and military bureaucracies of Veracruz with cronies and kinsmen and to put together whole armies out of local supporters and employees. Santa Anna's passion for gambling brought him into daily contact with a cross-section of Mexican society, from highborn officers to peasants, thieves, and rascals, affording him a keen understanding of his nation's culture and mores. Santa Anna owned haciendas in both the sweltering lowlands around the city of Veracruz and in the cooler tropical highlands near Jalapa, straddling the country's most valuable trading route and most important strategic corridor. Those who rebelled against the Mexico City government during the nineteenth century routinely sought to control Veracruz so they could commandeer customs revenues. The Veracruz-Jalapa route had been standard for foreign invaders of Mexico since the days of Cortés, so Santa Anna's knowledge of that part of the country gave him a tremendous home-field advantage during those tumultuous times. And his regional base also gave him immunity to the dreaded tropical diseases of the coast that wreaked such havoc among foreigners and highlanders. Santa Anna, then, provides perhaps the ultimate proof that nineteenth-century Mexico was less than the sum of its parts, and that whoever controlled the critical parts controlled, to a perilous degree, the nation's destiny.

In a time when ideological inflexibility was a crippling affliction in Mexico, Santa Anna's lack of convictions was a positive asset. His one reasonably secure conviction, in fact, was a disdain for the popular will, [REDACTED]

A key feature of Santa Anna's genius was his impressive ability to persuade people that he was honest and sincere despite mountains of evidence to the contrary. Some Mexicans were themselves fairly mystified at their own continued willingness to trust the wily general. Moderate politician José Fernando Ramírez, who was normally of a very skeptical turn of mind, wrote to a friend, "There is no doubt whatsoever that [Santa Anna] is returning as a real democrat, and I can conceive of

his being one." Ramírez, perhaps realizing how absurd that sounded, added laconically, "I cannot tell you on what I base my conviction."³