

# Mexico—The Essentials



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New York    Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Suddenly, Díaz's age, as he approached 80 years, became an issue. In a 1908 interview with the US magazine writer James Creelman, he attempted to regain the initiative. His self-congratulatory description of successes included a statement that he believed the people had developed sober, self-disciplined habits and could be trusted to choose a presidential candidate, so he would not run for election in 1910. This declaration drew a number of possible candidates.

Soon enough Díaz allowed himself to be drafted as a candidate. Would-be candidates dropped out, except for one. Francisco Madero had a vision that he explained in *The Presidential Succession of 1910* that called for the formation of an Anti-Reelection Party and used Díaz's motto, "effective suffrage and no reelection." His book went through a number of editions, each more critical of the incumbent regime. Díaz viewed Madero as an annoying gadfly, but he ignored the fact that his development had created a lower class in a desperate search for a leader. The president placed Madero under house arrest in San Luis Potosí just prior to elections. The voting occurred and, as to be expected, Díaz won. He celebrated both his reelection and the centennial celebration of independence that focused on him and his achievements.

## REVOLUTION!

Madero escaped to the United States. There he issued his Plan of San Luis Potosí to overthrow the Porfirian government; Madero, not quite sure of how to get things started, announced that the revolution would begin at 1 p.m. on November 20, 1910. The schedule did not work as planned.

Rebels attacked small towns in Chihuahua, but other uprisings came slowly and in scattered locations. The small, disparate rebel attacks spread across the countryside, soon reaching beyond the ability of the army or the Rurales to defeat rebels who appeared and then vanished. The insurgents suffered from their lack of leadership and unified objectives. Nevertheless, in April 1911, rebels under the command of Pasqual Orozco and Pancho Villa managed to isolate, besiege, and capture the federal army in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. The illusion of Díaz's strength began to crumble. Rebels captured Torreón on May 17, 1911, the major railroad town in the North. Deciding he faced defeat, Díaz ordered negotiations with Madero that concluded on May 21, 1911, with the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez. The president resigned and went to Paris into exile. A provisional president organized elections that Madero won.

The revolution's brevity proved disastrous. The issues that lay behind the mobilization of the provincial elites, workers, and subsistence farmers needed to be clarified and solutions defined. Those who had taken up arms assumed that Madero shared their objectives, but many soon learned he did not. Madero saw his movement for responsible democracy as a way of making revolutionary change unnecessary. A disaffected oligarch miscast as a revolutionary, he did not

comprehend the complaints of the lower classes. He saw no need to replace a bureaucracy that had directed national development. Instead of purging the bureaucrats and dismissing the federal army, he demobilized his forces. His idealism about the benefits of honest elections wore thin. When questioned on land reform, he rejected a program of expropriation, but said Congress would resolve the issue.

## A DOOMED PRESIDENCY

The Madero presidency appeared doomed from the start as alienated generals, the arrogant US ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, and apprehensive foreign investors, among others, discussed the need for an authoritarian president. After a few false starts, a coup broke out in the heart of Mexico City between political factions in the army and units commanded by Madero's trusted general, Victoriano Huerta. Fighting, soon called The Ten Tragic Days (February 9–19, 1913), alarmed US Ambassador Wilson, who facilitated a plot to replace Madero. The plan called for General Huerta to be acting president and, after new elections, Felix Díaz, the nephew of the former president, to take office. Soldiers arrested and murdered Madero and Vice-President José María Pino Suárez. Then Huerta double-crossed them all and seized the presidency.

Huerta expected a friendly reception from Washington, but the newly elected president, Woodrow Wilson, refused to recognize what he termed a "government of butchers." Not all state governors recognized Huerta's presidency. Governor Venustiano Carranza of Coahuila declared himself first chief of the Constitutionalist army and launched the armed struggle against Huerta. Other governors and veteran rebels, including Francisco Villa and Álvaro Obregón, joined the campaign to redeem the revolution of Madero.

## RENEWED REVOLUTION

The Constitutionalist were northerners with access to the border and weapons. President Wilson did not impose neutrality act restrictions on the purchase of military supplies. Nor did he hide his hostility to Huerta, and he magnified the seriousness of minor incidents to disrupt the flow of arms to his regime.

On learning that a German ship, the *SS Ipiranga*, intended to dock at the Port of Veracruz with a cargo of weapons including machine guns, for Huerta, Wilson decided to prevent the delivery. He ordered the invasion April 21, 1914, of Veracruz, and its occupation for six months outraged the country. Suddenly but briefly, the country rallied behind Huerta. Anti-American demonstrations, mixed with vandalism, erupted in Mexico City.

Determined to eliminate Huerta, the Constitutionalist leaders also battled among themselves. Carranza was surrounded by others who were eager to direct the nation. Pancho Villa, Álvaro Obregón, and Emiliano Zapata had different regional origins and saw the revolution differently. Carranza, an oligarch from an older generation, wanted to restore constitutional order. Zapata had a rural village

background. Villa had a reputation as a Robin Hood-like bandit. Obregón came from the lower middle class and had some education and municipal administrative experience. Of the three, Obregón tended to cooperate with the First Chief.

The Constitutionalist war against the Huerta regime followed the rails toward Mexico City and after 16 months forced Huerta into exile. Villa, without orders from Carranza, called a convention of military leaders to elect a provisional president at Aguascalientes. Calling themselves the Conventionists, Villa and Zapata joined forces and moved toward Mexico City with an army of 72,000 soldiers. Obregón, who had considered whether to join the Conventionists, decided to remain with Carranza, and withdrew his forces from Mexico City. Villa and Zapata held the capital, but still faced a formidable Constitutionalist force.

Obregón moved to Veracruz where a delighted US Army turned the city over to him, leaving a warehouse of weapons for his army. He understood that to recruit enough men to defeat Villa and Zapata, the Constitutionlists had to appeal to the popular classes. Carranza reluctantly issued decrees for land reform and made agreements with workers. Obregón retook Mexico City, contained Zapata in his home state of Morelos, and then hammered Villa with several defeats, forcing him north into the state of Chihuahua. Villa continued to make mischief most dramatically when he ordered a small raiding party to attack Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916. President Wilson, anticipating US entry into World War I, made a restrained response by sending General John J. Pershing in a fruitless attempt to catch Villa. Carranza, now president, protested the punitive expedition, but could do little other than stir up minor trouble in Texas in return. After 10 months, Wilson recalled the troops, who were soon on their way to Europe.

President Carranza concluded that the Constitution of 1857 needed to be revised, although not too radically. He arranged for a constituent assembly at Querétaro, whose delegates ignored the president. They wrote and approved a new, final document with the world's most advanced social provisions for workers and agrarians and restricting the Church. The 1917 Constitution provided a document to implement the social revolutionary goals of the delegates, but it proved too radical for the president, who simply ignored it.

Obregón, fully confident that Carranza would select him as his successor, led a revolt when the president selected an individual whom he expected to manipulate. Other ambitious military chiefs quickly campaigned against Carranza. In the face of Obregón's advance on Mexico City, Carranza planned to move the government, including the treasury, to Veracruz. His train shortly ran out of water for the steam boilers. A determined president and his party unloaded the horses and set off again; that night, men committed to Obregón assassinated the president.