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THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO, CIRCA 1821

Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, at a time when the United States was the world's oldest and most successful federal republic. In those days Mexico and the United States were very roughly comparable in size and population, and among the leadership of both countries there were enthusiasts for the ideals of progress, reason, science, and democracy. It is true that the United States was easily twice as wealthy as Mexico, but Mexicans tended to attribute this disparity to Spain's tyrannical mismanagement of its colonial economy. With independence, they expected soon to close the gap.

In fact, however, any similarities between the two nations were superficial, while the differences were profound—and all of the differences worked to Mexico's disadvantage. Some knowledge of those differences is essential to understanding why Mexico and the United States went to war in 1846, and why that war went so disastrously for Mexico.

DIFFERING LEGACIES

The United States and Mexico had both been colonies of European powers, but they were heirs to very different colonial legacies. Britain had distanced itself far more thoroughly from the medieval heritage than had Spain: it had limited the power of its monarchy, nurtured a robust private sector, championed the impersonal rule of law, and broken the religious monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church. A good portion of the British elite embraced the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and Britain's colonists eagerly seconded that embrace. That is, many of the most prominent leaders in Britain and its colonies believed that reason should trump tradition; that

progress and change should be welcomed rather than feared; that individuals should be equal before a clearly codified law and free to advance in life on the basis of merit rather than bloodlines; that sovereignty should be more or less popular and government should incorporate checks and balances as safeguards against corruption and tyranny; that wealth was not finite but was infinitely expandable through free trade, which would reward hard work and ingenuity, and that even the poor could prosper if they energetically pursued their own material self-interest; that the trend toward increasing social equality was something to be welcomed; and that citizens should be free to believe, say, and publish whatever they wished. Enthusiasm for such ideas—collectively known during the nineteenth century as "liberalism"—created a powerful bond among the ruling classes of the British Empire, one that would stand the founders of the North American republic in good stead as they forged their new nation.

While one group of Mexican leaders greatly admired all of the enlightened notions that so captivated the founders of the United States, another group of entrenched Mexican oligarchs clung to medieval habits with a ferocious tenacity. Even if there had been a consensus that liberal ideals were desirable, conditions in Mexico made it far more difficult for the Mexicans to implement liberal policies. When the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville praised the United States Constitution—the first instance of liberalism codified as a national charter—he described it as "one of those beautiful creations of human diligence which give their inventors glory and riches but remain sterile in other hands." To illustrate what he meant by "other hands," he asked his readers to consider the case of Mexico, which adopted a similar charter in 1824 and experienced only "anarchy" and "military despotism."[1] To a far greater extent than Anglo-America, Hispanic America clung to a tradition where rights were defined by inherited privilege; where social inequalities were said to be established by God and were considered necessary to maintain social peace; where the king made all important

decisions; where law was chaotic and readily abused; and where the economy functioned at the government's pleasure. In Mexico the colonial centuries had left a legacy perhaps too powerful to overcome, at least in the short term.

Differences in historical tradition were accentuated by sharp differences in land and people. Despite the self-serving claims of British American colonists that they had tamed a barren wilderness, the lands of North America were of course inhabited. But the natives were too scattered, weak, and unorganized to put up successful resistance, leaving them vulnerable to ruthlessly efficient extermination or relocation at the hands of whites. Nor was there a large, settled peasantry capable of stout resistance, such as existed in both Mexico and the Old World, so individual landownership and the pursuit of enlightened self-interest encountered fewer obstacles. British North America boasted its share of land barons, but big landowners were far from holding a monopoly of land, and unlike in Mexico there was no Roman Catholic Church claiming extensive corporate property and privilege. Accordingly, in the United States wealth circulated fairly freely, and ordinary citizens could hope to gain land and opportunity.

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."[2]

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, quarreling, drinking, stealing and lying drunk about the pavements, with their children crying with hunger around them."[3]

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."[4]

Nature itself dealt rather perversely with Mexico, exacerbating that "fearful difference" of which Humboldt spoke and making it difficult for Mexicans to forge a cohesive nation. Most of Mexico's fertile land is concentrated in the tropical highlands at the country's center, and that area was home to the largest portion of the Mexican population. The remaining population was scattered throughout a rugged and often harsh landscape. The difficulties of transportation and the tremendous variation in land and resources helped to make Mexico a country of regions. Common allegiance to a remote king and an official Church

afforded some coherence during the colonial period, but those bonds were weakened or destroyed with independence, and nothing appeared to replace them. Outside the capital city most Mexicans tended to identify with their own locality, often referred to as *la patria chica* or "little homeland." Family, community, and local political bosses mattered, while the nation as a whole remained a troublesome abstraction. While in the United States the land's topography contributed to social equality and national sentiment, in Mexico it encouraged diversity, inequality, and conflict. The midnineteenth-century writer Mariano Otero lamented this phenomenon in a sentence that seemed to encapsulate the woes that haunted his generation: "In Mexico there is not, nor is there a possibility of developing, a national spirit, because there is no nation." This exaggerated regionalism, joined to the appalling divisions of race and class, would emerge as one of the country's most intractable problems during its early decades, and it would contribute greatly to the outbreak and course of the U.S.-Mexican War.

Clearly, then, the United States and Mexico differed profoundly in their histories and social realities. Important differences prevailed in political traditions as well. The British North American colonies were self-governing to a far greater extent than were the Spanish American colonies. In British North America colonial assemblies functioned practically without interference from the mother country. Only landowners had the right to vote, but landownership was so pervasive that some 50 to 80 percent of all male colonists did indeed vote, and only about five percent of legislation coming out of the colonial assemblies was overturned in England. True, the American colonists had no representation in the British Parliament, and governors were generally royal appointees. Still, politics in the American colonies were assertive and robust, and there was broad agreement on the essential principle that sovereignty resided—or at least should rightly reside—with the people.

Mexico, meanwhile, was heir to one of western Europe's most intransigent monarchical traditions.

From 1521, when King Charles I crushed a popular uprising at the Battle of Villalar, Spain—Mexico's imperial master—was resolutely devoted to the practice of royal absolutism. While creoles, as American-born whites were called, might gain some limited political experience on town councils, or perhaps even as judges on the local governing bodies known as *audiencias*, the political system was in essence a chaotic jumble of jurisdictions maneuvering under the auspices of a powerful king and his viceroy (the highest royal representative in the colonies). One gained influence not through formal institutions such as representative assemblies but through the informal channels of blatant cronyism or trading on inherited privilege. Spain was remarkably successful in excluding the colonists almost entirely from imperial politics, leaving the leaders of independent Mexico with scant political experience and few viable political traditions to draw from as they forged their new state.

In both the United States and Mexico, religion could be counted on to furnish a host of contentious issues, but those issues were generally much less contentious in the former. Many of the founders of the United States were deists, men who believed that God took little or no active interest in his creation and that humans must attend to their own destinies. "It will forever be acknowledged," wrote John Adams in 1786, with perhaps a bit more optimism than was warranted, "that these governments were contrived by reason and the senses."[5] While religious intolerance might rear its ugly head in various locales at different times, the United States generally came to enjoy a tradition of religious pluralism and toleration. If most of the Founding Fathers of the United States were not notably religious, neither were they aggressively antireligious, as they had no need to be. There was no official church seeking to impede the aims of statesmen, no church claiming enormous landholdings and entrenched wealth, no clergy demanding political power and special privileges. The United States was thus spared the immensely damaging phenomena of religious intolerance and "anticlericalism," as liberal hostility toward the

Catholic Church and its clergy was known.

Anticlericalism was indeed a crippling feature of life in Mexico. Some—generally those who called themselves "liberals"—came to blame the Roman Catholic Church for many, if not most, of Mexico's problems. According to the standard liberal critique, the church monopolized large portions of the nation's resources, using them inefficiently and unproductively. The taxes the church collected, mostly in order to sustain a parasitic upper clergy and to maintain its opulent cult, diminished the liquid wealth of the nation. The church, liberals charged, was one of the principal bulwarks against true equality of all citizens, for it had been largely responsible for institutionalizing the system of castes, and priests tended to instruct the poor to accept their lot on earth gracefully in anticipation of a celestial reward. Priests, moreover, claimed the traditional *fuero*, which entitled them to immunity from prosecution under civil law—in the liberal view, a glaring impediment to the cherished goal of social equality. The clergy's allegiance to Rome, liberals believed, was an obstacle to national sovereignty, and Rome's claim that it had the right to appoint top clergymen threatened to subvert civil government at every turn. Moreover, liberals asserted, the church maintained unsanitary practices, such as interring the remains of pious elites in the walls and beneath the floors of cathedrals, and it was unalterably opposed to science, progress, and liberal political ideas, making free use of censorship and spiritual intimidation to uphold its dogmas.

Whether or not such charges were entirely true and fair—and there is ample evidence that they were exaggerated and oversimplified—critics of the church grew increasingly shrill as the nineteenth century progressed, and the clergy grew increasingly intransigent in the face of that criticism. The 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."[6] 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.

Finally, the United States and Mexico were heirs to very different economic legacies. The Anglo-Americans were profoundly influenced by British writers who were at the forefront of a move toward economic liberalism. They came to believe that economies functioned according to natural laws and that governmental interference in economic matters only impeded the functioning of those laws. If individuals were free to pursue their own interests, and if goods were allowed to circulate freely, the marketplace would regulate itself to the benefit of all. And while the unregulated market certainly had its pitfalls, this free trade ideology undeniably helped to undergird Britain's industrial revolution, which in turn brought a tremendous economic boom in the last half century of the British American Empire. The United States, upon freeing itself from that empire, continued to enjoy vigorous international trade for decades into its independent life.

By contrast, the economy of the Spanish Empire was founded resolutely upon the principles of mercantilism. That is, Spanish imperialists held that the amount of the world's wealth was finite and that governments should interfere in all aspects of the economy so as to ensure for themselves as

much of that wealth as possible. Other European colonial powers held to these same principles, but the Spaniards outdid them all in their overbearing insistence on economic control. Since mercantilists tended to measure wealth in terms of precious metals, the Spaniards focused almost monomaniacally on the exploitation of the rich silver mines of Peru and Mexico. Miners and merchants were organized into guilds that were licensed by the Spanish crown. Silver could be shipped only on authorized fleets leaving from authorized ports under heavy guard. Spain awarded itself an absolute monopoly on trade, which meant the colonies were forced either to pay exorbitant prices for consumer goods or to collaborate with smugglers abetted by Spain's enemies. The colonies were not permitted to trade among themselves; nor were colonists permitted to produce commodities that would compete with the ones produced in the mother country. One British economist of the late seventeenth century took Spain to task for such heavy-handed dealings with its colonies. "Future times," he wrote, "will find no part of the Story of this Age so strange, as that all the other States of *Europe* … have not combined together to enforce a liberty of Trade in the *West Indies*; the restraint whereof is against all Justice."[7]

During the eighteenth century the Bourbon kings of Spain experimented with some easing of these restrictions, but at the same time they dramatically increased taxes and systematically favored Spanish-born citizens over creoles for political appointments. Even at its most liberal the Spanish system seemed designed to inhibit entrepreneurship. The colonies were awash with irritating restrictions and regulations; the legal system was chaotic and arbitrary, ensuring that property rights were always ambiguous; privileged groups enjoyed special favors, and the nonprivileged suffered in the bargain; and vast amounts of land were tied up in entails belonging to the church or to Indian villages. According to one estimate, Spain's intrusions into its colonial economy cost its colonists thirty-five times more than Britain cost its North American colonies.[8] In sum, for three centuries Spain maintained the

economies of its American colonies in a state of dependence and underdevelopment.

Mexico's poor economic performance after independence, however, cannot be blamed entirely on Spanish policies. Nature also contributed to Mexico's economic woes. The densely populated central plateau regions, home to most of the population, are interrupted by forbidding volcanic ridges and deep gullies, making transportation difficult and costly. To the east and west of the central plateaus, the land descends precipitously toward the sweltering lands of the coasts. To the north and south the drop-off is more gradual, but soon enough the lush highland landscape gives way to hot, hilly scrubland and dry desert. Mexico's principal port, Veracruz, is separated from the center by some 260 miles of notoriously rugged terrain. Road-building on such terrain would have been difficult even for a country of abundant wealth; for Mexico, it was a practical impossibility. Mexico also lacks navigable rivers, so the difficulty and high cost of transportation was a permanent brake on Mexico's economic progress. Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the wife of the Spanish ambassador to Mexico in the 1840s, was dismayed when she visited a farm on land that was both beautiful and fertile and found that farm to be "the picture of loneliness and desolation." The farm's owner explained that the local population was sparse and essentially self-sufficient, so the only possible market for his grain was Mexico City, more than a hundred miles away. Any profit he might have made would have been eaten up by transportation costs and taxes. And so both agriculture and industry languished.

The differences, then, between the United States and Mexico around 1821 could not be measured in a handful of statistics. During the nineteenth century the notions of reason, science, progress, equality, and freedom became identified with the very concept of modernity. The country with fewer obstacles to putting those notions into practice would have a major advantage in the race for preeminence. The United States entered its independent life with far less historical baggage than Mexico, and its experiments with new

political, social, and economic forms were much more likely to succeed. Its population was more ethnically homogeneous and culturally unified than Mexico's; and while Americans considered their natural landscape an enticing vista with room to expand and develop new resources and markets, Mexicans found their landscape presented only maddening obstacles and generated endless conflict. In the first half of the nineteenth century the United States clearly would win the race for preeminence. In 1800 total income in the United States was merely twice that of Mexico, but by 1845 it was thirteen times greater. In short, as the United States grew more powerful and prosperous, Mexico descended into frustrating cycles of conflict, despotism, penury, and despair.

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

A final and extremely crucial difference between the United States and Mexico involved the two countries' routes to independence. Independence in the United States came about as the result of a bloody but purposeful war. The political and military leaders of the American independence movement became the nation's Founding Fathers, and they were able to design the new republic in accordance with the Enlightenment values they largely shared. Mexico's experience was more ambiguous and troubled.

Mexico's independence movement began much later than that of the United States. This was not because Mexico's creoles (American-born whites) were pleased with their imperial masters: the Spaniards had discriminated against the creoles, restricted their economic activities, and taxed them mercilessly. Rather, the delay was caused principally by their fear of the yawning gulf between the races and classes. Creoles were white, and many lived in considerable comfort. They well understood that the dark-skinned, impoverished masses tended to see little distinction between creoles and Spaniards: as far as those masses were concerned, the two groups looked pretty much alike, and both looked like the people responsible

for centuries of oppression and exploitation. A breakdown of order, the creoles understood, might well land them at the mercy of angry mobs bent on vengeance.

In 1808 Napoleon Bonaparte's armies overran Spain, forcing the abdication of the Spanish king and his heir. Spaniards immediately rose in arms against the usurpation, forming a decidedly liberal movement that, in 1812, promulgated a liberal constitution. The Spanish American colonists were forced to choose between recognizing Napoleon's brother, Joseph, as their king; striking out for independence; or taking the more cautious course of forming caretaker governments until the rightful king, Ferdinand VII, could be restored to the Spanish throne. In Mexico the more cautious option was chosen, and Mexico's government fell into the hands of very conservative Spaniards.

On September 16, 1810, a fifty-seven-year-old priest named Miguel Hidalgo launched a rebellion against that government. Unlike many of his fellow creoles, Hidalgo did not doubt the wisdom of mobilizing the impoverished Indians and castas to man his army. He summoned them to the main square of the small town of Dolores and explicitly exhorted them to exact vengeance against the *gachupines* (an insulting term for Spaniards) for three centuries of humiliation and despoilment.

Unfortunately for the independence movement, the first engagements of Mexico's war of independence appeared to confirm more conservative creoles' worst fears. In the wealthy mining town of Guanajuato, Hidalgo's troops went on a rampage. Several hundred Spaniards were killed in the initial siege, and afterward the rebels indulged themselves in an orgy of looting, pillaging, murder, and mutilation. The scene was repeated about a month later at Guadalajara, though here the rebels increased the horror by decapitating their Spanish prisoners. To the comfortable classes of Mexico, it seemed as if the very sinews of civilization had been sundered. They compared these events to other well-known nightmares of modern times: the sans-culottes of the French revolution flooding the streets of Paris with the blood of aristocrats; the black slaves of Haiti rising

up against their masters, the wealthy planters, carrying out brutal massacres and torching plantations. The leading conservative of early nineteenth-century Mexico, Lucas Alamán, who was an eyewitness to the siege of Guanajuato, would write decades later that the rebels' battle cry —"Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe and death to the *gachupines*!"—"after so many years … still resounds in my ears with a frightful echo!"

For conservative Mexicans, the lessons of the early course of the independence war were pivotal. First, these events resoundingly confirmed their suspicion that the vast majority of their fellow countrymen were irresponsible and dangerous and that therefore social control must be maintained at all costs; second, in Mexico the ideas that inspired these events—democracy, republicanism, equality, civil liberties—were impractical at best, lethal at worst. These conservatives, having stared into the gaping maw of barbarism, concluded that they themselves should hold a monopoly on political power. By the 1830s they had adopted a name for themselves: they were the *hombres de bien*—the men of goodness.

Hidalgo was captured and executed in 1811. His successor, a mestizo priest named José María Morelos, was captured and executed in 1815. Other leaders would follow, but the movement became negligible with Morelos's death. When independence did finally come to Mexico, it was largely a reaction *against* the liberal ideas championed by Hidalgo and Morelos.

It was, in fact, an archconservative royalist army officer who consummated independence after he had been fighting ruthlessly against it for a decade. Alarmed by a liberalizing movement in Spain, Brigadier General Agustín de Iturbide issued an invitation to the leader of the surviving rebel forces, General Vicente Guerrero, to join him in declaring Mexico's separation from Spain. On February 24, 1821, Iturbide promulgated his Plan of Iguala, a declaration of independence designed to please a very broad and varied constituency, from reactionary royalists and pious Catholics to liberal firebrands. The plan addressed only those issues on which there was already widespread

agreement, or at least issues on which compromise was probable. The first three articles declared that Roman Catholicism was to be Mexico's official and only legal religion; that Mexico was an independent country; and that its government was to be a constitutional monarchy. Those three principles—religion, independence, and monarchy—were known as the Three Guarantees. The plan had nothing but kind words for Spain and Spaniards and the legacy they bequeathed to Mexico. Although Spain would withhold official recognition of Mexican independence for another fifteen years, its representative on the scene, Superior Political Chief Juan O'Donojú, signed a treaty recognizing Mexico's independence on August 24, 1821, and from that point onward independence was an accomplished fact. On September 27 Iturbide and his army made their triumphal entry into Mexico City amid artillery salvos, ringing church bells, fireworks, flower petals, and the Te Deum played by several orchestras.

According to the Plan of Iguala, government power was to be exercised for the time being by a junta, or committee, of notable men who would assemble the new congress. Of the thirty-eight men Iturbide named to the Junta, not a single one had fought in or sympathized with the rebel armies, and none advocated republicanism. On September 28 this Junta issued an Act of Independence of the Mexican Empire that was effusive in its praise for Iturbide but said not a word about the eleven-year struggle for independence that had preceded his belated "revolution." Clearly, the men who were now setting themselves up to exercise power in the new nation were not the ones who had fought for independence, and most had in fact been frank enemies of the liberating movement. One would not require extraordinary powers of clairvoyance to see that this simple fact foreshadowed enormous political problems in the offing.

The soldiers who had fought for independence—for the most part, impoverished Indians and castas—were, it seemed, to be shut out of the new nation's ruling class. Worse yet, the high level of provincial independence that had prevailed during

the colonial period had been exacerbated by the violent, decade-long independence struggle, and several regions in the new republic were strenuously disinclined to cooperate with any central government. From the outset, calls for federalism—the division of political power among the country's many regions—were strong and insistent. Governing Mexico, then, would require coming to grips with formidable regional, class, and ethnic divisions. It would be a daunting task.

In the United States the generation that secured independence from Britain may have had its disagreements, but those disagreements were not nearly as fundamental as the ones that beset their counterparts in Mexico. Tellingly, during Mexico's first years as an independent republic a full-throated debate erupted regarding who should properly be recognized as the true author of independence. Should that accolade go to Father Hidalgo and his successor Morelos, who had called for popular government, an end to racism, redistribution of wealth, and judicial reforms—revolutionary changes aiming to resolve the country's severe divisions? Or should it go to Iturbide, who sought to appeal to people on every side of the great social divide, in effect denying the very existence of that divide? In any event, the divisions that Hidalgo and Morelos had sought to heal could not be denied for long. Mexico's internal conflicts would soon render it vulnerable to the expansionist whims of its powerful neighbor to the north.

2

THINGS FALL APART

An accident of fate and European power politics had cast the United States and Mexico as neighbors; the United States' determination to increase its national territory set the two countries on a collision course. The collision was not inevitable; nor was its outcome foreordained. Mexico's leaders at the time of independence were in fact quite optimistic, seeing no reason why they should not match the United States' progress in short order. They were confident that their country boasted a great wealth of resources—resources that Spain had perversely failed to develop even while jealously shielding them from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, Mexico too failed to fully develop its fabled resources, inspiring frustration in Mexico and cupidity in its neighbor to the north. That frustration and cupidity grew exponentially as Mexico grew steadily weaker and more divided. U.S. policymakers, meanwhile, did their bit to exacerbate and take advantage of Mexico's many problems. These trends were already abundantly evident before Mexico completed its first decade of independent life, and they would cost the country dearly in its eventual showdown with the United States.

A ROCKY START: CENTRALISM VERSUS FEDERALISM

Mexico's beginnings as an independent nation were in many ways inauspicious, though the true extent of its problems would not become apparent for some time. It was, however, clear from the outset that Mexicans had profound disagreements about the kind of government they wished to have and about what social group should wield power.

Agustín de Iturbide's declaration of independence from Spain prescribed a

constitutional monarchy for Mexico. Enthusiasts for the institution of monarchy hoped that the king of Spain, Ferdinand VII, or some other member of the Spanish Bourbon line might assume the throne of Mexico, giving the monarchy a clear claim to legitimacy. But Spain refused to recognize Mexico's independence—in fact, it did not recognize Mexico until 1836—and made it clear that no Bourbon prince would consider Mexico's request. Spain's obstinacy engendered much hostility in Mexico and inspired some to argue that Mexico should choose its new ruler from among its own sons. The most vocal and insistent faction hoped to elevate Iturbide himself to Mexico's throne. When soldiers and mobs ransacked the streets and shouted from the galleries of congress in favor of an Iturbide kingship, opponents of the idea —and there were many—stood down. So it was that on May 19, 1822, Agustín de Iturbide was declared Emperor Agustín I. On July 21 he was crowned in a lavish and expensive ceremony.

Agustín I had little time to enjoy his throne. Some in congress tried to place strict limits on his power, and the emperor resisted their efforts. When some congressmen took to conspiring against him, Iturbide responded by dissolving congress. In December 1822 a young army officer named Antonio López de Santa Anna, who headed the battalion of the crucial port city of Veracruz, declared his forces in rebellion against the emperor. In February the army battalion that had been charged with putting down Santa Anna's rebellion instead joined that rebellion. At the end of March, less than a year after his coronation, Iturbide abdicated his throne and sailed off into exile.

In nineteenth-century Mexico, the sine qua non for any rebellion was the "plan"—usually a stirring statement of the principles that a given rebellion claimed to champion. The plan for the anti-Iturbide rebellion, known as the Plan of Casa Mata, demanded popular sovereignty and the reinstallation of congress. Its appeal was principally to people in Mexico's regions and to a powerful segment of the Mexican political class who called themselves variously "federalists," "republicans," or "liberals." A key issue for such

people was home rule. During the waning years of the Spanish colony, regional autonomy had increased, and the anarchic wars of independence had accelerated the trend. By the 1820s many of Mexico's regions were ill disposed to take orders from Mexico City, which in their view had scant understanding of or sympathy for their problems and prospects. They often had a point: given the dearth of good roads, a simple exchange of letters between Mexico City and a provincial city some three hundred miles away could easily take three weeks, making central coordination difficult and making regional autonomy a de facto reality regardless of what anyone might wish. Some of the regions that most ardently desired regional autonomy did so largely because they experienced considerable prosperity during the early decades after independence and were reluctant to share that prosperity with a profligate central regime. The state of Zacatecas, for example, had rich silver mines that were not significantly damaged during the war for independence, and with the help of British investors, they quickly came to exceed the best production levels of the colonial period. With a healthy treasury the Zacatecans were able to experiment with bold reforms in education, agriculture, and politics, and they had good reason to suppose that meddling by Mexico City would only diminish their prospects.

Liberals also hoped to do away once and for all with the detritus of medievalism that they associated with the vanquished Spanish colony, and to embrace modernity zealously. They ardently championed Enlightenment ideals—popular sovereignty, individual rights and freedoms, secular government, and legal and social equality. For them, the heroes of independence were men like Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos, and Vicente Guerrero—men who, with their dark-skinned, impoverished armies, had fought a desperate struggle to change the very structure of power and wealth in Mexico.

On the other side of the political chasm were the conservatives, who wanted the lion's share of power and control to remain in Mexico City, where it had been since the days of the Aztec Empire.

They also wanted power to remain in the hands of the social classes who had wielded it for three hundred years—white men who were born to distinction and authority, the hombres de bien. They wanted to preserve and elevate the institutions that, in their view, had undergirded the glorious Spanish Empire: a strong army, the Catholic Church, and a legitimate monarchy.

Over the years these two sides would adopt different titles for themselves; they would adjust their priorities with circumstances; their power would wax and wane; and they would fall out bitterly among themselves. But their essential disagreements were apparent at the outset of the Mexican Republic, and they proved poisonous and irreparable.

With Iturbide's overthrow, the federalist faction was greatly encouraged and at least momentarily in charge. The Iturbide interlude had done much to render conservatives weak, disorganized, and on the defensive. The federalists wasted no time in seeking to eradicate the now-defunct empire from memory: they freed political prisoners, replaced the emperor's likeness on the coinage with that of an eagle, canceled planned palace renovations, and nullified the Treaty of Córdoba and the Plan of Iguala, the documents that had set the stage for Iturbide's brief reign. Finally, and most importantly, they declared that Mexico was now free to adopt whatever form of government best suited it. It was a heady moment. In the view of freshly empowered federalists, the country was starting with a clean slate, unencumbered by history or tradition or inherited prejudice, limited only by its leaders' powers to imagine. Those leaders harbored a deep antipathy to the institution of monarchy. "Liberty," whatever precisely that might mean, was the watchword of the hour.

The deputies appointed a provisional executive triumvirate and set to discussing the details of the new government. Somewhat surprisingly, they decided not to dissolve the old congress or to hold new elections, even though the old congress had been elected using a deeply flawed method of deciding representation: instead of being elected according to region and population, representatives

were chosen to represent corporate groups (the clergy, the army, and the legal profession). The decision not to convoke elections for a more truly representative legislature provoked a response that was an early harbinger of later woes: political leaders in the states of Jalisco and Zacatecas announced that only a federal republic would suit them, and that they were not bound to obey the national congress or executive power. Other provinces soon seconded that demand. In July the central government sent a fully equipped military expedition to invade Jalisco, but the crisis was resolved through negotiations, which ended in assurances that the regions would indeed have considerable autonomy. This was a full-fledged revolt of the provinces, wherein Mexico's regions made it clear that they fully intended to exercise veto power over any decisions of the central government that were not to their liking.

The most conspicuous fruit of the federalist revolt was the federalist Constitution of 1824, a vital document during the decades preceding Mexico's war with the United States. That constitution divided Mexico into nineteen states and four territories. The territories were to be administered directly by the federal government, while the states were to be "independent, free, and sovereign," with the power to form their own constitutions, legislatures, and state militias. State militias were originally designed to provide for local defense and to escort prisoners and treasury shipments in cases where the regular army was unavailable. They would shortly emerge, however, as the chief stronghold of stubborn federalists, as they were wholly under the control of state governors and in some cases seemed to be little more than the private armies of local warlords. The constitution had other defects as well. It gave congress clear power over the executive, and it failed to create an independent judiciary. It therefore lacked "checks and balances" that might have smoothed the process of power sharing. The constitution also maintained religious intolerance and upheld the traditional exemption from civil law for the clergy and military. Voting for president was to be indirect, based on the decisions of the

state legislatures. The president would be the man who garnered the most votes, while the vice president would be the man with the second largest number, which meant that the two heads of the executive branch might well be bitter enemies. In the event, the first presidential election under the new constitution resulted in a victory for General Guadalupe Victoria, a hero of the independence wars, with the vice presidency going to Nicolás Bravo, also an old independence fighter but one of a far more conservative turn of mind.

For all its shortcomings, the 1824 Constitution was a creative response to the tremendous diversity of Mexico. It aimed at institutionalizing the sort of unity within diversity that many thinkers held to be Mexico's best hope. It (theoretically at least) erased distinctions of caste and class, allowing unrestricted male suffrage.

While the constitution was clearly federalist, there was no shortage of critics who warned of the dangers of federalism run amok. One deputy to the constituent congress, liberal Dominican theologian Fray Servando Teresa de Mier—a towering figure in Mexico's independence struggles—rose to denounce the excesses of federalism, which he considered to be overly derivative of foreign models and unsuited to Mexican realities. Federalism, he declared, might work in the United States, as the Anglo-Americans were "a new people, homogeneous, industrious, diligent, enlightened and full of social virtues, educated as a free nation." Mier's view of Mexicans was unflattering: they were, he said, "an old people, heterogeneous, without industry, hostile to work, who wish to live off public office like the Spaniards, as ignorant in the general mass as our fathers, and rotten with the vices that derive from the slavery of three centuries."[1] Federalism, he said, would pave the way for the tyranny of uneducated and irresponsible mobs. He attended the constitutional signing ceremony dressed in black, declaring he was attending the funeral of his country. The other signers were, however, jubilant.

"MANIFEST DESTINY" AND THE

MEXICAN FRONTIER

What critics of federalism feared most was, quite simply, the dismemberment of Mexico. It was unquestionably a valid concern, for even the country's core regions had tremendous heterogeneity and a decided lack of national sentiment. Of still greater concern was the fact that more than a quarter of the land that Mexico claimed was largely unsettled. Most of that unsettled land was in Mexico's northern frontier regions, where threats to Mexico's claims were palpable: the Russians made plain their interest in acquiring California, whose inhabitants were nearly all impoverished Indians and where Mexico's presence amounted to only a handful of crumbling missions. The entire northern territory was populated by nomadic tribes who would never willingly accept Mexican rule. Most alarming of all was the presence, to the east, of the United States, whose aggressive expansionist ideology—the ingredients of what would eventually come to be known as Manifest Destiny—was abundantly evident.

In its earliest incarnation the concept of Manifest Destiny was religious, conceived by pilgrims arriving on American shores in search of freedom to practice their exacting brand of Protestant Christianity. As they saw it, they were God's chosen people, led by their deity to a promised land, a virgin land uncorrupted by the taints of Old World politics and the heresies of Roman Catholicism. With the Enlightenment, the religious elements largely gave way to convictions about the rightness of republicanism, democracy, and social equality, but the notion of destiny lost none of its missionary zeal. The concept was protean enough to take on new characteristics as the republic evolved, but in its essence Manifest Destiny said that the Anglo-Saxon peoples of America had the right and indeed the duty to spread the blessings of freedom and civilization to those who dwelled in darkness. This notion was perhaps best expressed by Illinois congressman John Wentworth on the eve of the war with Mexico, who said he "did not believe that the God of Heaven, when he crowned the American arms with success [in the

Revolutionary War], designed that the original States should be the only abode of liberty on earth. On the contrary, he only designed them as the great center from which civilization, religion, and liberty should radiate and radiate until the whole continent shall bask in their blessing."[2]

Contradictions, inconsistencies, and much outright hypocrisy were all bound up with the Anglo-Americans' insistence that they had the right to expand their borders. Racial hubris was a large part of the concept: Anglo-Saxons, in this view, were a vibrant and vigorous people, and other races were effeminate, decrepit, and corrupt. Thomas Jefferson, one of the earliest and greatest architects of U.S. expansion, wrote in 1786 that the United States "must be viewed as the nest, from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled." Hardly eager to see the colonies of Spanish America attain their freedom, he rather hoped they would remain in the decrepit hands of the Spanish Empire "till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them, piece by piece."[3] While theoretically a key goal of American expansion was to redeem backward peoples, few of the architects of American expansion were optimistic regarding the prospects for redeeming the peoples of Latin America. Jefferson was convinced that free government and Roman Catholicism were simply incompatible. John Quincy Adams denounced Spanish Americans as "the most ignorant, the most bigoted, the most superstitious of all the Roman Catholics in Christendom" and insisted that to try to convert them to true democracy would be "as absurd as similar plans would be to establish democracies among the birds, beasts, and fishes."[4]

The issue of race underlay the notion of Manifest Destiny in other, still more insidious ways. Defenders of slavery, mostly concentrated in the southern states, believed that the lands south of the Mexican border were in some ways uniquely hospitable to human bondage, and that those lands held the key to the preservation of that "peculiar institution." By expanding southward, slave owners hoped to increase their representation within the Union. Ironically, opponents of slavery also found

reason for southward expansion. Thomas Jefferson, though himself a slave owner, was convinced that slavery's days were numbered, but he was equally convinced that the white and black races were profoundly unequal and would be unable to live side by side in peace. Free blacks would have to be sent off to colonize some foreign place. Jefferson favored the West Indies for this purpose. Others felt that just about any territory to the south would make an excellent dumping ground for freed blacks, which would in turn preserve the racial uniformity of the United States and hence its peace and security.

Whatever the reasons or justifications, the United States embarked on its expansionist career very early on in its history. For the most part that expansion was remarkably peaceful, accomplished through purchase and negotiation—supplemented by the occasional bit of trickery—rather than through military exploits. In 1803 the United States reaped a windfall when France sold it the Louisiana Territory, an enormous swath of land stretching from New Orleans in the South westward to the northern Rockies and east to the Mississippi River. The boundaries included in that transaction were vague, leading the United States to claim that both West Florida (which stretched between the Apalachicola and Mississippi Rivers) and Texas were included in it. By 1812 the United States had managed to assert its claim to West Florida. The boundary between Louisiana and Texas, however, remained in dispute: Spain claimed that Louisiana ended around Natchitoches, while the United States suggested that it ran to the Rio Grande.

Meanwhile American adventurers, with tacit endorsement from Washington, continued to encroach on East Florida, which was regarded as essential to U.S. security. After 1810 Spain, while fighting desperate wars to retain its wealthy colonies in Mexico and South America, felt it hardly worth the effort to defend East Florida, a relatively undeveloped frontier region. When forces led by Andrew Jackson invaded and occupied the territory in 1818, the United States, in effect, dared Spain to do something about it. Spain decided to negotiate.

The fruit of these negotiations was the Adams-Onís Treaty, concluded in 1819. Under the terms of the treaty, Spain sold Florida to the United States and agreed to abandon all claims to lands in the Pacific Northwest, in exchange for a U.S. pledge to renounce its claim to Texas and to forgive $5 million worth of unpaid claims owed to U.S. citizens. The treaty set the boundary line at the Sabine River, the boundary between the modern states of Louisiana and Texas.

Though not apparent at the time, the Adams-Onís Treaty was a key development leading to the U.S.-Mexican War. The Mexicans, who inherited the treaty upon attaining their independence from Spain, maintained that it made their claim to Texas legally unassailable. Many Americans, for their part, heatedly denounced the treaty and its architect, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. In their view, Texas was clearly part of the Louisiana Purchase, and signing away the U.S. claim to it was positively treasonous. Those who were convinced that Texas was rightfully part of the United States were not easily dissuaded. Anglo-Americans had been mounting armed expeditions into the region since 1801. Incensed by the Adams-Onís Treaty, Dr. James Long, a friend of Andrew Jackson, invaded Texas in the summer of 1819 with a small band of armed adventurers in hopes of claiming the territory for the United States, but the expedition was ill-fated and eventually cost Dr. Long his life.

Dr. Long's failure ended the age of the filibusters, as private armies were known (the term *filibuster* is derived from *freebooter*, or pirate). Such expeditions were manned mostly by roguish adventurers, and their actions were illegal by nearly any reckoning. But the end of filibustering also marked the start of a new epoch in the history of Texas, for the Mexican government had determined that bold measures would have to be tried if Mexico's northern regions were to be retained.

The Mexicans were keenly aware of how vulnerable those regions were. While no codified international law existed on the issue, there was a general understanding among nations that a country's claim to a given territory would remain

tenuous unless and until that country could establish significant settlement on the land in question, building cities and infrastructure and otherwise cementing its ownership. That was precisely what the Mexicans realized they must do. But there was a sticking point: where precisely were the colonists to come from? Mexico's own population was sparse. The vast region from Oregon to Guatemala held fewer than seven million inhabitants, many of them peasants with deep ties to the land and no incentive to move to an unsettled land filled with hostile Indians. Dimming the colonization prospects further, many Mexican officials took a dim view of their own compatriots, insisting that the "Mexican character" was poorly suited to colonization. Clearly, if Mexicans were unable, unwilling, or unsuited to colonize the northern regions, then foreigners would have to be enticed to do the job. Anglo-Americans were eager to oblige, but from the Mexican point of view, relying on such immigrants would be perilous. The Mexicans had seen how American migration into West and East Florida had proved a prelude to U.S. seizure of those lands from Spain. Indeed, the Americans were fairly open in viewing their migrants as the advance guard of empire. When Spain had opened its Louisiana Territory to foreign immigrants in 1788, Thomas Jefferson wrote that he wished "a hundred thousand of our inhabitants would accept the invitation. It may be the means of delivering to us peaceably what may otherwise cost us a war."[5]

The Spanish government had done its best to prohibit migration from the United States into Texas, though Americans did indeed settle there as squatters. The government of independent Mexico generally shared Spain's view of Anglo-Americans, which held that they were unassimilable, subversive, and untrustworthy. Even so, the matter of colonizing Texas was pressing: only settlement could secure Mexico's claim to Texas, and Texas must be secured to serve as a buffer against U.S. expansion. It was a wicked conundrum, but accepting Anglo-American immigrants appeared to be the only recourse. Mexican officials consoled themselves with the thought that Anglo-Americans

were skilled and diligent, and once they had tamed Texas, it might be a more attractive destination for migrants from other countries, including Mexico itself. Eventually, they hoped, a balance might be achieved.

In 1819 a man named Moses Austin, a New Englander who had made and lost a fortune mining lead in Missouri, traveled to Texas and solicited permission to start an Anglo-American colony there. After some initial hesitation, Texas governor Antonio Martínez granted him permission. The trip to and from Texas was so strenuous, however, that Moses Austin's health was irreparably ruined, and he died in the summer of 1821. His dying wish was that his son should take up his colonization project where he left off, and Stephen—then twenty-eight years old—proved more than equal to the task.

Stephen F. Austin was of a decidedly different breed from the rough-and-tumble filibusters who had tried since 1801 to take Texas by force. He was likable, handsome, hardworking, and well educated, with cultivated manners, a moderate temperament, and a sometimes unfortunate tendency to assume the good intentions of others. He arrived in Texas in June 1821, even as his father was dying in Missouri and as Mexico was in the process of securing its independence from Spain. During the Spanish period Texas had been a remote frontier region where intrepid missionaries sought to evangelize recalcitrant Indians. The scene of a savage military campaign during Mexico's war of independence, its Spanish-speaking population had been reduced from a high of some four thousand in 1810 to barely more than two thousand in 1820, most of them concentrated in the dilapidated villages of San Antonio de Béxar and La Bahia (soon to be renamed Goliad, an anagram for Hidalgo, the hero of independence). The *tejanos* (as Mexican residents of Texas were called) kept some cattle and horses and raised a bit of corn, but it was the extremes of their poverty that most impressed Stephen Austin—they had, he reported, "little furniture or rather none at all in their houses—no knives, eat with forks and spoons and their fingers."[6] The province was also home to perhaps forty thousand Indians belonging to at least thirty-

one tribes, many of whom were nomadic warriors —Comanches, Caddos, Kiowas, Karankawas, and others.

Austin's petition to have his father's colonization project reaffirmed was approved by Governor Martínez, and he began bringing in migrants. But in such uncertain times, there was doubt as to who had the authority to approve Austin's contract, and it became clear that his only hope of starting a legal settlement was to travel to Mexico City. Austin thus, from the outset, made plain his intention to do everything by the book, and for most of his adult life he never wavered from his commitment to be a good citizen of Mexico.

Austin arrived in Mexico City in early May 1822. There was no doubting his resolve: he diligently studied the Spanish language, eagerly solicited Mexican citizenship, and cultivated good relations with Mexican statesmen—especially those who served on the congressional colonization committee, which was in the process of writing Mexico's colonization law. Although Austin had near-superhuman patience and a remarkable ability to befriend men of all ideological persuasions, he was fairly appalled by the political intrigues of the Mexican capital. Such intrigues stretched what he had assumed would be a perfunctory trip of two weeks into an ordeal of eleven months.

The colonization committee drew up a colonization law and sent it to congress for debate within a month of the Emperor Iturbide's coronation. Although some details would change, this bill served as the model for all that followed. The law said that land would be distributed to *empresarios*, who would contract to bring in at least two hundred families to settle in the frontier regions. Settlers who were not already Roman Catholic would be required to adopt that faith, and the government would be bound to protect their property, freedom, and civil rights. To further induce settlement, settlers would be exempt from all taxation during their first six years in the country, and goods imported for use by the colonists were partially tax exempt. The children of slaves brought into Mexican territory would be free at the age of fourteen, and the slave trade was

prohibited. A head of family was entitled to 4,438 acres of land for farming and an additional 177 acres if he planned to raise livestock. Empresarios would be awarded 66,774 acres for every two hundred immigrants they brought in. It was a remarkably generous law, with land grants twice as large as Austin had initially asked for.

The passage of the law was long delayed by Iturbide's dissolution of congress in October, and by the rebellion that erupted against his regime in December. The emperor finally signed the law on January 4, 1823. It was annulled along with all other Iturbide-era legislation upon his overthrow in March, but in August 1824 another, nearly identical, colonization law replaced it. Austin's own empresario contract was approved by congress in early April, and he returned to Texas, a bit chastened and more cynical than he had been a year earlier. "They are a strange people," he wrote of the Mexicans, "and must be studied to be managed." Austin held that the Mexicans made much of their national honor but would cheerfully betray that honor if they could do so without being exposed. Ever the good citizen, however, he sternly admonished his colonists in Texas "not to meddle with politics, and to have nothing to do with any revolutionary schemes."[7]

Austin, who soon negotiated two additional colonization contracts, was by far the most successful of several empresarios, who settled large numbers of American families in the state. Adding to these numbers were many Americans who migrated into Texas illegally. Soon Anglo-Americans became the overwhelmingly dominant element in the Texas population. Most of them had no intention of abiding by their end of the bargain.

POLITICS AND POINSETT

As the Anglo-American colonies began to grow and flourish, Mexican officials became increasingly uneasy about U.S. intentions toward Texas. U.S. newspapers, complained Mexican chargé d'affaires Manuel Zozaya in 1823, routinely sang the praises of Texas and suggested that it rightfully belonged

to the United States. Political opponents of John Quincy Adams, Zozaya reported, made the former secretary of state's role in signing away U.S. claims to Texas a major political issue in the 1824 presidential campaign, in which Adams was the leading contender. The secretary of the Mexican legation at Washington, Colonel José Anastasio Torrens, added further to Mexican anxieties when he recounted a conversation he had had with General Andrew Jackson. Jackson, the most dynamic political force in the country, allegedly explained to Torrens that the best way to gain territory was to occupy it and, after effective possession was gained in that fashion, to "treat for it." That, he said, was how the United States got possession of the Floridas, an affair in which Jackson himself had played a leading role. Torrens and other diplomats also complained of American haughtiness, for many American politicos were brazenly contemptuous of Mexicans and disdained Mexican claims. Torrens and others warned against allowing Anglo-Americans to become predominant in Texas, even as Stephen F. Austin was consolidating his colony there.

Adding still further to Mexican anxiety was the appointment in 1825 of the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, one Joel Roberts Poinsett. A former high-ranking official of the Iturbide government claimed that during an 1822 visit to Mexico, Poinsett had unfurled a map of North America and, pointing to the boundary specified in the treaty of 1819, declared it "undesirable." The United States, Poinsett had casually explained, wanted Texas, New Mexico, and Upper California, as well as parts of Lower California, Sonora, Coahuila, and Nuevo León. It was no great leap for Mexicans to assume that Poinsett was the advance guard of American avarice.

Poinsett is best remembered in the United States for his signal accomplishment as an amateur botanist—it was he who introduced into the United States the Mexican Flor de la Noche Buena (Christmas Eve Flower), which became the poinsettia. In Mexico, however, he is best remembered for meddling.

A native of Charleston, South Carolina, Poinsett

was an intrepid traveler whose colorful résumé included time spent in the court of Czar Alexander I of Russia at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, where he declined an offer of a colonelcy in the czar's army. He traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East, everywhere finding that the rest of the world came up grievously short in comparison with his own beloved country. "It is impossible," he once wrote, "for me to speak of my country otherwise than with fondest partiality—a country which Liberty, leaving the nations of Europe to mourn her flight in the gloom of despotism and corruption, has chosen as her favorite asylum. Long may her bright influence extend over my happy country. Long may she enlighten a grateful people who … cherish her with the warmest enthusiasm."[8]

Touching as Poinsett's enthusiasm may have been, it also made him in some ways a singularly poor choice for the position of U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett's love of his country blinded him to its deficiencies and hypocrisies and ensured that he would take a jaundiced view of any foreigners who did not aspire to imitate the Anglo-Americans. Himself a slave owner, he was only moderately troubled by the obvious fact that liberty had bestowed its blessings selectively. Like all enlightened republicans, he professed to believe that nations should possess the right to determine their own course; yet at the same time he derided any system that did not closely resemble that of the United States, and he was seldom bashful or apologetic about nudging things in that direction. During the 1810s the U.S. government sent him to South America with orders to cultivate good relations and trading contacts between the United States and the South American countries. Instructed to maintain strict neutrality, Poinsett instead fraternized openly with liberal independence fighters in Chile, even helpfully offering them his own draft constitution, modeled closely on that of the United States.

In 1822 the U.S. government sent Poinsett—by now quite fluent in Spanish and a putative authority on Latin American culture—to Mexico to report on conditions there. His report, published in 1824, painted a mixed portrait of Mexico. Poinsett, like

Austin, was appalled by the extremes of poverty and inequality he witnessed, put off by the excessive religiosity of Mexican Catholicism, and scandalized by the drunkenness, cockfights, tobacco-smoking women, beggars, and bandits, as well as the squat mud huts of the common people ("I certainly never saw a negro house in Carolina so comfortless.") Above all Poinsett despised the Emperor Iturbide, for Iturbide represented the loathsome Old World practices of monarchism and autocracy. He steadfastly believed that the majority of the Mexican people clamored for republicanism as practiced in the United States of America.

Poinsett lost little time in alienating a significant portion of Mexico's ruling class. The problems were partly caused by international rivalry. Great Britain, eager to partake of Mexico's fabled wealth, sent as its chargé d'affaires one Henry George Ward, who sought advantage for England partly by discrediting the American ambassador at every opportunity. Ward made a point of placing Poinsett's every indiscreet utterance before the Mexican president and press, hoping to inflame prejudice against him. The two diplomats would give banquets for Mexican politicians, each always pointedly not inviting the other and each gleefully excoriating his rival during the customary banquet orations.

Poinsett's official instructions caused problems, for they urged discretion but not impartiality. He was "to show on all occasions an unobtrusive readiness to explain the practical operation and the very great advantages which appertain to our system." More damaging, he was instructed to open a dialogue on three sensitive topics: the independence of Cuba, which the United States opposed and which the Mexicans favored; preferential treatment for U.S. commerce; and most controversial of all, the possession of Texas.

Poinsett was instructed to try to persuade the Mexicans to part with Texas. Those instructions, authored by Secretary of State Henry Clay, said Poinsett should push for a boundary as far to the west as possible, preferably the Rio Grande. Failing that, he should argue that the boundary be either the Colorado or the Brazos River. The case that Clay

suggested Poinsett make to Mexican officials was not only unpersuasive, it was insulting. Clay argued that by ceding Texas, Mexico would save much money, for it would be relieved of the burden of fighting the Comanches and other warlike Indians. He also suggested that, as the population of Texas expanded, friction would increase over the navigation of shared river systems, which could easily be obviated by Mexico's relinquishing territory. Finally, severing the northern half of Mexico's territory would bring the blessing of placing Mexico's capital city in a more central location within the country (this from the representative of a country whose capital was on the mid-Atlantic seaboard, some sixteen hundred miles from San Antonio). The case was so absurd, and Mexican feelings on the issue so raw, that Poinsett, diplomatically and in code, declined to follow his instructions, suggesting to Clay that the matter was best left to fate. "Most of the good land from the Colorado to the Sabine," he advised, "has been granted by the state of Texas and is rapidly peopling with either grantees or squatters from the United States, a population [the Mexicans] will find difficult to govern, and perhaps after a short period they may not be so averse to part with that portion of their territory as they are at present."[9] This, of course, was precisely the strategy that Andrew Jackson had outlined to Colonel Torrens.

In fact, Poinsett was extremely discreet regarding Texas, generally ignoring requests from the American administration to raise the issue on the grounds that the administration simply did not understand the intensity of Mexican feelings on the matter. He was less discreet in one of his early and most notorious forays into Mexican politics, which involved the founding of a Masonic lodge.

In 1825, when Poinsett arrived in Mexico, Freemasonry was already well established there. The first lodges established in Mexico pertained to the Scottish rite, which some critics charged with being overly favorable toward monarchy, aristocracy, and the church. In order to counter their influence, Mexican liberals wished to organize lodges of the York rite, which would advocate federalism, republicanism,

anticlericalism, and expanded suffrage. Poinsett, himself a great champion of those values, helped to organize the first York rite lodge, holding meetings for a time in his own home and securing the society's charter from the grand lodge of New York.

The rivalry between the Yorkinos and Escoceses, as the two groups were known, quickly grew bitter and heated. A more poisonous prescription for the new nation's politics could hardly have been devised, for the rival lodges operated as closed, secret societies. In the highly charged political environment of early republican Mexico, and in the absence of established political parties or nonpartisan press organs, the Masonic lodges came to operate much like rival gangs, devoting themselves to intrigue and assuming that their enemies were engaged in the most vicious conspiracies and subterfuges. During the second half of the 1820s the Yorkinos steadily gained power and influence throughout the republic—and with it the enmity of the Escoces faction. Conservative antipathy toward Poinsett increased in proportion to Yorkino power, and despite his public statements that he regretted the politicization of the societies and had ceased contact with them once their political nature became clear, conservatives came to see him as the very inventor of Mexico's political discord.

Each of the two antagonistic lodges founded its own newspaper, and journalism became a blood sport. Since neither side had accurate information about what the other was up to, they gave their imaginations free rein. The Escoceses were alarmed that the Yorkinos deliberately curried support among the underclass—those they derided as the "sans-culottes," the rabble—the people who had run amok during the revolution for independence, who loathed whites, and who threatened to snuff out the light of civilization. This activity was especially terrifying because the Yorkinos were unselective in their recruiting, so that to the Escoceses their numbers appeared to be increasing like a ghastly pestilence. The Escoceses feared that the Yorkinos, with their zealous embrace of federalism, intended to hoard all funds

at the local level, bleeding the national treasury dry. The Yorkinos, for their part, suspected that the Escoseses were conspiring with Spanish monarchists to turn the clock back to the darkest days of the colonies, taking away the hard-won liberties of the provinces and the lower classes.

The Yorkinos' most reckless and damaging initiative was a demagogic campaign against the country's Spaniards. Spain fueled passions by obstinately refusing to acknowledge Mexico's independence and threatening a reconquest. Yorkinos tended to associate Spain with the racial hierarchy that had oppressed and exploited the country's Indians and mestizos for three centuries. They also claimed, with some justice, that Spaniards still held a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth and political power.

The Yorkinos' xenophobia took an ugly turn in 1827. In January of that year a middle-aged Spanish-born monk named Joaquín Arenas, a specialist in the production of counterfeit money, was arrested and charged with conspiring to return Mexico to Spanish rule. Soon some thirty-five other alleged co-conspirators, including a pair of distinguished generals, were taken into custody. The plot seems largely to have been a figment of the Yorkinos' paranoid imagination, but nevertheless the Yorkino papers were soon buzzing with a near-hysterical debate on what should be the republic's attitude toward Spain and Spaniards. The Yorkinos charged that the Escoceses were part of the monarchist conspiracy, and the Escoceses countered that the conspiracy charges were merely another stunt in the ongoing Yorkino power grab. In December, after a spate of anti-Spanish riots and vigilante violence throughout the country, the Yorkino-controlled congress passed a bill giving Spaniards six months to leave the country.

Conservatives saw in all of this further evidence of what they most feared: the ignorant rabble were bent on nothing less than the destruction of civilization. Vice President Nicolás Bravo, grand master of the Escoceses, headed a rebellion in December 1827. The rebels demanded that all secret societies be banned, certain government ministers be purged, and the constitution be

respected. Yielding nothing to the Yorkinos in their proclivity for demogogic scapegoating, they also demanded that Ambassador Joel Poinsett be expelled from the country. By this time conservative Mexicans were convinced that Poinsett, by injecting pernicious alien ideas into the nation's bloodstream, was the person primarily responsible for setting Mexico on a ruinous path. They saw his actions as part of a deliberate U.S. plot to weaken Mexico, setting it up for eventual dismemberment. State legislatures demanded Poinsett's expulsion, riots erupted, and he received death threats.

Vice President Bravo's rebellion lasted only about two weeks before being defeated by the forces of General Vicente Guerrero. Although this rebellion was unsuccessful, it was enormously important in establishing a tragic precedent: it signaled a wholesale loss of faith in the rule of law and a willingness to embrace violence as a means of gaining political ends.

The defeat of the conservatives brought not peace but rather further complication and enmity. A group of liberals, frightened by the increase in radicalism, had bolted the Yorkinos and founded a faction of Impartials that backed the fairly nondescript Manuel Gómez Pedraza for the presidency in 1828. The radical Yorkinos favored Vicente Guerrero, a hero of the independence wars. Guerrero was a former muleteer of mixed Indian, black, and white race for whom Spanish was a second language.

It was a vicious campaign, but after all the mudslinging and voting was over, Gómez Pedraza claimed a majority of votes. Guerrero's supporters immediately resorted to rebellion, beginning with an uprising in the state of Veracruz, headed by General Antonio López de Santa Anna, that demanded that Gómez Pedraza's election be nullified and that there be another round of expulsions of Spaniards. The rebellion seemed to be sputtering when it was joined at the end of November by a garrison within Mexico City, which launched an attack from an old prison-turned-armory known as the Acordada. Soon Gómez Pedraza fled into exile, and Vicente Guerrero

assumed the presidency.

The most memorable event of this so-called Rebellion of the Acordada took place on December 4 and 5, when rebel soldiers, joined by beggars and escaped prisoners, attacked a complex of shops known as El Parián on Mexico City's posh central square. The rebels justified their attack by claiming that most of the shops were owned by Spaniards and that their goods could be claimed as spoils of war, though in fact most of the shops were Mexican owned. The violence of the attack was appalling. The attackers plundered some two to three million pesos worth of goods, murdered merchants, stabbed one another, set the shops ablaze, and even looted the storerooms of the National Palace. At least a thousand people were left destitute by the riots. Such a scene, occurring as it did in the city's elegant main square, afforded conservatives the most chilling glimpse yet of the specter of barbarism. Once again they conjured up the old analogies to sans-culottes running amok in the French Revolution. They decided that they would have to redouble their efforts to crush this trend toward unrestrained democracy and concentrate power in their own hands—wealthy, civilized, responsible hands.

By the start of 1829 the optimism of the early Mexican republic was a fading memory. "The country," wrote conservative leader Lucas Alamán, "is consuming and ruining itself at full speed."[10] Mexico's liberals and conservatives made no room for compromise: both factions had come to view politics as an ongoing crisis, and compromise seemed a potentially fatal mistake. Infighting among the factions, and disputes between the center and the regions, helped to ensure that the central government's finances would remain precarious. The constitution spoke of the equality of all Mexican citizens, but the distance between rich and poor was vast and increasing. Only a few years before, many Mexicans had thought that their nation might catch up with or overtake the United States in power and wealth. Such hopes had long since been abandoned. Although some in the liberal

camp continued to regard the United States as a model and an inspiration, their positive sentiments were fading and resentment was building steadily. Other Mexicans saw the United States as the source of a pernicious ideology that was destroying Mexico from within, paving the way for a treacherous assault on the nation's vulnerable territories.

There was at least one apparent bright spot: in Texas, Stephen F. Austin's colony was flourishing. He and several other empresarios had signed contracts to settle more than eight thousand families in Texas, and Austin was well on his way to fulfilling his contracts. And Austin, at least, seemed the ideal empresario, a man who eschewed partisanship and was emphatically resolved to be a good and loyal citizen of Mexico. In fact, however, despite Austin's efforts, Texas was already slipping out of Mexico's grasp.