

The Legacy of an Ambiguous Relationship

Nineteenth Century Mexico-U.S. Relations¹

(Part One)

*Jesús Velasco Márquez**

The United States has always played an important role in Mexican history, affecting and occasionally shaping Mexican foreign policy. It has also influenced economic, political and social programs. This presence has contributed to the individual and collective perceptions that Mexicans have of their neighbor. Consequently, relations between Mexico and the United States are more than a traditional diplomatic history; they share a common history, the result of the overlap of their national ones. Each country's domestic problems and solutions have had repercussions on the other. However, these repercussions have been asymmetrical, as is the relationship as a whole.

This essay will analyze this overlap of national histories during the nineteenth century. It will also attempt to explain the complexity of the problems bilateral relations have always had, which have influenced the Mexican view of the United States until our time.

On December 12, 1822, the United States recognized Mexico as a sovereign nation. Bilateral relations would be shaky and unstable from then until the end of the Mexican civil war and the French intervention. The two countries were allies

in 1832, broke off diplomatic relations in 1837, renewed them two years later, went to war between 1846 and 1848 and became partners of convenience in 1867. This turbulence was closely related to domestic instability in Mexico and to regional conflicts and party disputes in the United States. The European quest for political and economic influence in the former Spanish empire was another important factor.

Mexico's nation-state building stage was rather hectic. After a weak alliance of the dominant groups that achieved independence, regional interests and factions dominated a national government, producing social and political unrest until 1880. The United States participated in party struggles directly and indirectly. Liberal politicians, both radical and moderate, thought of U.S. institutions as an example of modernity that fostered economic growth. The United States was their natural ally, and they proposed the adoption of a similar system for Mexico. Conservatives accepted the need for a reform in the economy but wanted to preserve the political institutions of the Spanish tradition. They felt the same distrust and rejection of Americans that Spain had felt about Britain since the sixteenth century, extended to its colonies. They sought stronger relations with the European powers and even saw the direct support of one of them as an option.² These

* Researcher and professor at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM).

Relations between Mexico and the United States are more than a traditional diplomatic history; they share a common history, the result of the overlap of their national ones.

ideological confrontations invited foreign intervention and foreign interests began meddling in Mexican domestic affairs. European diplomats supported the Conservatives, and the Americans backed the Liberals. The intervention of the first two U.S. plenipotentiary ministers, Joel R. Poinsett and Anthony Butler, was flagrant. American diplomats were not the only agents trying to influence Mexican politics, but their tactlessness made them more conspicuous. In addition, U.S. government insistence on the sale of Mexican territory sharpened the Mexican public's rejection of the American ministers.³

Three issues dominated the agenda of bilateral relations: trade, reparations payments and boundary disputes. The first two were solved through difficult bargaining: in 1832 the Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation was ratified, and in 1839 a convention that set reparations to American citizens was agreed upon. But the definition of the border between the two countries became a primary source of conflict.⁴ In 1828 both governments signed and approved a Treaty of Limits, but it was not ratified until 1832. This treaty recognized the boundaries that the United States had negotiated with Spain in 1819 in the Adams-Onís Treaty. During those negotiations, the Monroe administration had made clear its designs on the province of Texas, using the dubious argument that it had been part of the Louisiana Purchase. Afterwards, during the John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson administrations, the U.S. government attempted to obtain Texas by offering to purchase it; the Jackson administration even expanded its territorial ambitions to northern California.

American expansionism was complex because it involved regional and party interests, socio-cultural forces and traditions, as well as national security considerations.⁵ On the one hand, the United States had emerged as a strong state but with a very weak sense of national unity. This became evident shortly after the adoption of the

Constitution with the regional and party disputes that dominated the political debate up to the Civil War.⁶ On the other hand, American society was by definition mobile, a characteristic intensified by the economic upheavals of 1819 and 1837. Also, it was believed that American society was a model of virtue to be copied or that its mission was to enlarge its domain, and since democratic trends had advanced during the 1830s, this belief became part of political rhetoric. Finally, the United States was interested in consolidating a trade area in the Western Hemisphere, and in that endeavor, they saw European —particularly British— interests as a danger to their welfare and security.

These factors were not foreign to Mexican politicians. However, Texas was opened to American colonization due to a poorly designed policy.⁷ New Mexico was opened to American trade before linking it to the rest of the country, thus exposing it to an early attachment to American interests. Insufficient resources and negligence left California defenseless. The United States began gaining control over an important part of these territories.⁸

The first contentious issue was the secession of Texas in 1836 with the help of American volunteers and President Andrew Jackson's consent. The second was its annexation by the United States in 1845, claiming the Rio Grande as the new southern international border. The third was President James K. Polk's ambition of linking the acquisition of California and New Mexico to reparations payment. Mexico was left with no bargaining room and the United States opted for military action. It is important to underline that although President Polk alleged that the defense of U.S. territory was the reason for the war, the United States army immediately invaded Mexico, driving all the way to Mexico City in 1847. Faced with U.S. aggression, the Mexican governments never declared war against the United States, but stated that they had to combat the foreign invasion to defend Mexico's territorial integrity, the basic principles

of international law and the rule of law and justice over force. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo put an end to the war after two years. Mexico was forced to give way to American territorial interests. Aside from the economic and human losses for both sides, an important effect of the war was to infuse Mexican consciousness with distrust towards its northern neighbor making the United States a catalyst for Mexican nationalism.⁹

After the war, Mexico and the United States each went into a period of internal crisis. In the United States the acquisition of Mexican territory became a disturbing component of regional equilibrium between the North and the South, particularly with the admission of California as a free state in 1850. From then on the compromises for maintaining the Union were harder to reach and the final outcome was the secession of most of the southern states in 1861, sparking the Civil War.

In the meantime, in Mexico the war led to the redefinition of the political parties and their platforms. The Conservative Party, still considering the United States a potential enemy of Mexican territorial security, wanted to reestablish the monarchy with the support of the European powers, particularly France; the Liberal Party sought to maintain the republican system and proposed a program of radical social reforms. The ideological controversy led to a civil war from 1854 to 1867; both Liberals and Conservatives realized that they had to appeal to foreign powers. The Liberals could only get the support of the United States, while the Conservatives would seek it from a European power, eventually obtaining it from France. Hence, both jeopardized national sovereignty and security.

These domestic conditions were reflected in bilateral relations. During the whole decade of the 1850s, the momentum of U.S. expansionism was reflected in private filibuster attempts across the border. Officially, the aim was still to complete

the plan that it had not been possible to complete during the negotiations of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo,¹⁰ meaning that some interests still wanted more territory along the southern U.S. border and total strategic control over the Gulf of Mexico, the major Caribbean islands, as well as possession of the Yucatan peninsula and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. At that time, these areas were considered strategically important for economic and security reasons. The annexationist ambitions over the Yucatan peninsula were dropped in 1853, but in that year Mexico was again forced to yield another piece of territory on its northern border through the Treaty of "La Mesilla" (the Gadsen Purchase) which also granted the U.S. some concessions in Tehuantepec.¹¹

President Buchanan's administration saw the political crisis in Mexico as an opportunity to obtain the territorial possessions he had been unable to get when he was secretary of state in the Polk administration. So when the political confrontation broke out and the Conservative government gained control, the American government tried to push for territorial and strategic concessions, but its demands were rejected; the Buchanan administration then decided to break off relations with Mexico's Conservative government and began opening avenues to approach the Liberal government headed by Benito Juárez. In 1859, William Church was sent to Veracruz, where the Liberal government had settled, as an informal envoy of the American government offering to recognize the Juárez government in return for the cession of the Mexican border states, or the possibility of establishing an American protectorate in Mexico. A few months later, instead of the informal envoy, a formal plenipotentiary minister, Robert L. McLane, was sent with the same instructions. The Juárez administration was able to resist the territorial demands, but by the Treaty of Commerce and Friendship and the convention to administer it, the American government became a trustee of the Liberal government

An important effect of the 1847 war was to make Mexicans distrust their northern neighbor, which became a catalyst for Mexican nationalism.

of Mexico. In other words, the Liberals in Mexico had accepted an American protectorate. The Liberal government was now inextricably linked to American interests. Those accords were never approved by the U.S. Congress because of regional and ideological differences, as well as the approaching 1860 elections, but subsequent events granted American support to the Liberals for reasons of U.S. national security.¹² The beginning of the U.S. Civil War put an end to the American menace to Mexican territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Between 1861 and 1862, an avalanche of events pushed the two governments to reconsider their positions toward each other. On January 11, 1861, Benito Juárez seized Mexico City defeating the Conservatives. A month later, the Confederation of American States was created and by April, the Civil War had begun in the United States. In January 1862, Spanish, British and French forces invaded Veracruz after Juárez's default on Mexico's debt payments. Spain and Britain would withdraw but France would insist on this attempt to support the Conservatives and establish a monarchy under Maximilian of Habsburg. The diplomacy of the two U.S. and the two Mexican governments led to a progressive line-up of the Liberal administration in Mexico and the Union in the United States. When the Civil War was over, the U.S. government demanded the French leave Mexico under the tenets of the Monroe Doctrine.¹³ It also threw its support to the Mexican republican government.

Domestic divisions and the presence of a monarchist government under the auspices of a European power across the southern border made the Americans realize that they had to strengthen a nationalist regime in Mexico with American-style institutions without demanding more territorial gains. Mexican liberals could now proceed with their project without giving way to United States interests. A new partnership of convenience emerged between the two countries. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ This work was carried out under the auspices of the Mexican Association for Culture.
- ² Edmundo O'Gorman, *La supervivencia política novohispana. Reflexiones sobre el monarquismo mexicano* (Mexico City: Fundación Cultural Condumex, 1969), Chapter 6.
- ³ Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, *México y el mundo. Historia de sus relaciones internacionales* vol. 1 (Mexico City: Senado de la República, 1990), pp. 45-49.
- ⁴ Carlos Bosch García, *Historia de las relaciones entre México y los Estados Unidos 1819-1848* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1961), Chapters 1 and 6.
- ⁵ Thomas Benjamin and Jesús Velasco Márquez, "The War Between the United States and Mexico. 1846-1848," Jaime E. Rodríguez O. and Kathryn Vincent, eds., *Myths, Misdeeds, and Misunderstandings. The Roots of Conflict in U.S.-Mexican Relations* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1997), p. 105 on.
- ⁶ Jesús Velasco Márquez, "Regionalismo, partidismo y expansionismo. La política interna de Estados Unidos durante la guerra contra México," *Historia Mexicana* vol. 48, no. 2 (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1997), p. 311 on.
- ⁷ Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, comp., *De la rebelión de Texas a la guerra del 47* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1994), pp. 15-21.
- ⁸ David J. Weber, *La frontera norte de México, 1821-1846. El sudoeste norteamericano en su época mexicana* (Mexico City: FCE, 1988), Chapter 10.
- ⁹ Jesús Velasco Márquez and Thomas Benjamin, op. cit., pp. 151-154.
- ¹⁰ David Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation. Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1975), p. 540 on.
- ¹¹ Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *México frente a Estados Unidos (Un ensayo histórico, 1776-1993)* (Mexico City: FCE, 1994), pp. 67-72.
- ¹² Lorenzo Meyer, "Las crisis de la élite mexicana y su relación con Estados Unidos. Raíces históricas del Tratado de Libre Comercio," Gustavo Vega, *México-Estados Unidos. 1990* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), pp. 80-90.
- ¹³ Julius W. Pratt, Vincent O. De Santis and Joseph M. Siracusa, *A History of United States Foreign Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955), pp. 155-156.