

Tan'enbua, Frank  
n.p. & Mexico City, 1936-1941  
To Josephus Daniels  
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*Daniels*

Mexico, D.F.,  
July 6, 1938.

My dear Mr. Ambassador:

As you know, I have spent the last month traveling about the country with President Cárdenas. I joined him in San Luis Potosí on June 1 and said good-bye to him yesterday; and before leaving for Peru I thought I would give you some of my impressions of the immediate situation in Mexico.

On leaving San Luis Potosí we traveled through the State with practically no military protection, though it is true that while we visited Ciudad Maíz, which is the birthplace of Cedillo, we had about two dozen soldiers with us, although Ciudad Maíz itself had a considerable number of military people stationed there. We went to El Salto, which is difficult to get to, and walked through woods and jungle for about seven kilometers with no armed force whatever except the ordinary pistols Mexicans carry as a matter of course, and I think one member of the party carried a machine-gun. After leaving the State of San Luis Potosí we went to Tampico, visited the oil fields all through the Huasteca district, went to Tuxpam, Veracruz, visited Poza Rica; and by using the Mexican battleship OBREGÓN we traveled to Puerto México and went up the Coatzacoalcas River to Minatitlán.

The general impression that I have is that the oil fields are at work; the laborers are enthusiastic; the reception the President had in these fields was quite impressive in its spontaneity and vociferousness. There are undoubtedly some disciplinary problems in the oil fields between the unions, but as a whole the thing seems to be working a great deal more smoothly than anyone would have assumed to have been possible. I do not wish to discuss the oil issue in this letter to you and am simply giving you the general impression that a month's visit among the oil fields has left with me - which can best be summarized by saying that I gained the impression of orderliness and enthusiasm and a great deal of faith in the President himself. I might repeat that we traveled through  
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The Honorable Josephus Daniels,  
American Ambassador,  
Mexico, D.F.



all that district without any military guards and without any policemen.

Before I said goodbye to the President, he showed me a letter he had received from Castillo Nájera in Washington, and it is this letter which is the chief reason for my writing to you. The letter reported a conversation between Castillo Nájera and Mr. Welles and indicated that the offer of the Mexican Government to pay for the small properties which had been expropriated, especially in the Yaqui Valley, would not be accepted by the American Government without raising the larger issue of the Mexican Government's responsibility for all American property which has been affected. I was also told about, but was not shown, a letter to Ambassador Castillo Nájera from Mr. Welles emphasizing and strengthening the general tone of the conversation which Mr. Castillo Nájera's letter reported.

It is my impression that a very serious psychological let-down has resulted from the position assumed by the State Department in this matter. I think the feeling that President Cárdenas had when he agreed to try to pay, during his own term, for the small properties expropriated in general, and for the Yaqui Valley in particular, was that he thought he was doing something President Roosevelt wanted done. It was a kind of spontaneous, friendly gesture of good will on his part, to meet what he thought would be the interest of President Roosevelt in the little man. Cárdenas did it, as I gather, without raising or attempting to raise the larger issues involved. He has a very keen appreciation of President Roosevelt and of his internal and external policies and he went out of his way to try to do something to show his personal good will towards those policies. To have this act on his part become the basis for raising a series of issues which the Mexican Government feels it is not prepared to face, has led to a kind of psychological slump which leaves us in our relations with Mexico not only where we were some months ago, but, I am afraid, a little further back than that. My guess is - and I am just guessing - that we are worse off now, from the point of view of feeling and attitude, than we have been at any time during a period of more than a year certainly.

It seems worth while, in view of the above, for me to try to state the Mexican situation on its agrarian side as I think the Mexicans see it, and, in part at least, as I see it myself, looked at internally in Mexico and not externally from the United States.

The Mexican Revolution was, in the opinion of the  
Mexican



Mexican Government, fought by the peasants for the sake of a piece of land which they could till and own. For reasons which are too complex to go into now, the process of land distribution has been slow. It is faster now than at any time since 1915, when it first began; but even so, they feel they are only about half-way through. There are on the books of the Agrarian Department at the moment over twelve thousand demands from villages for land, which the Mexican Government feels have to be met not only if the purpose of the Revolution is to be fulfilled but also if internal peace is to be maintained. This is a matter of fundamental importance to us if we want to understand what is going on on the agrarian side in Mexico. The Mexican Government feels - and I think it is right in that respect - that the agrarian movement is stronger than the Government; that no Mexican government since 1915 has been able to stop the process of land distribution, even if it wanted to; that the present administration could not stop the process of land distribution if it wanted to without precipitating either a revolution against itself of a very serious character, or, if not a revolution, certainly universal and unorganized violence all over the country. The thousands of villages which have had no land given to them will not, from the point of view of the Mexican Government and I think the Mexican Government is right, stand by and see themselves denied what other villages across the road or on the other side of the hill have been given. It would amount to political suicide if any administration in Mexico should bring the agrarian movement to an end now, without completing the process of land distribution. This process must be seen as a fundamental historical change taking place in Mexico, which, like a flood, is stronger than any obstacle which stands in its way; and the only thing any government in Mexico can do until the process is completed is to go along with it, willing or unwilling. Previous governments in Mexico have gone along against their will, in part at least, - reluctantly; and they have had continued and continuous violence and murder all over the country. The present administration considers it its duty to Mexico to go along with the flood and to satisfy the demands of the common people in that respect - partly because of humane feelings on the part of the present administration, but largely because of a kind of political insight into Mexican history which makes them feel that the only way to peace and stability and democracy in Mexico is through the process of land distribution and that until that is completed nothing else of fundamental character can really be achieved in Mexico.

That being the case, there are a great number of issues which it is very desirable for us to be very realistic about. I am convinced myself that the present agrarian



agrarian movement can not be stopped either by this administration or by any other administration which might replace it, without precipitating a revolution. If we really mean to bring the agrarian movement in Mexico to an end, we would have to face the possibility of intervention - a possibility which seems very remote at the moment. But even if we did intervene, we should end, within a year after intervention, by doing what President Cárdenas is doing, because we would discover that we could not administer the territory without giving the people the land they want. Otherwise there would be such universal violence that it would be uncontrollable. The one difference that intervention would make would be that we could arrange to buy the properties before we distributed them, and the present government can not arrange to do that; but we cannot change the fundamental policy of government in Mexico in that respect for the time being.

That raises another issue: the issue of compensation. The Mexican Government's income is less by nearly half than what New York City spends on its public and high school system. Out of that meagre income it has to maintain an army, a diplomatic service, and run a government. It simply has not got the money that would be required to purchase the land that political forces compel it to distribute. From one point of view, of course, the Mexican Government, if this process is going to continue to its end, will distribute about two-thirds of the area of the country, and I assume it is a true statement to say that no government is rich enough to buy its own country, and this is probably what is happening in Mexico. Rough estimates are that the present value of land already distributed may run to a billion dollars, and they themselves feel that the process is probably only half through. If the Mexican Government were to issue bonds against that property it could not afford to pay the interest on them.

In view of the enormous demands and small income of the Mexican Government, such things as villages asking for help in getting drinking water to cut down infant mortality; such things as trying to increase the cultivated area of the country so that the basic food supply would be higher; such simple things as setting up schools for the children of peasants and of soldiers, so that the future of Mexico as a democratic nation may be one day assured -- are of such immediate urgency that the present administration can not refuse to meet these demands in so far as it has the power to do so, and any attempt on its part to assume financial responsibility for the basic historical process of the conversion of land ownership from a feudal to a democratic system would simply mean that it would have to strip its administration of any kind of effort to improve the lot of  
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the common people in these simple matters, and yet be unable to meet the financial requirements involved in this land distribution. I am not defending the Mexican Government; I am trying to explain its position as it sees it; and I may say for myself that it is a fairly realistic view of the matter. The Mexican Government has not got the money to pay for the land it has taken away and the land it will, as a matter of inevitability, take away in the near future because the demands of the people are implacable and their hunger is so great that nothing, so far as I can see, will stop them, not even violence. Violence is something that two sides can practice, and Mexican peasants are not afraid to lose their lives in an effort to satisfy an age-old hunger for a piece of land they can till and own. The Mexican Government is caught between two forces, neither of which it can control: the underlying social readjustment which is stronger than itself; and the demand of native and foreign landowners for compensation, which it can not meet. Under the circumstances it does what any other government would do: it takes the easiest course in the matter because that is the only course it can take if it is to maintain political stability. It yields to the inevitable.

Now, to ask the Mexican Government to assume financial responsibility for American lands expropriated is to ask it to assume responsibility ( I might say for what is not a very great sum in view of the total amount involved) for the property of Mexican landowners, English landowners, Spanish landowners - who have suffered the most - and other nationalities; and, as I have already indicated, that would require the assumption of responsibility for an amount of money on which it could not even meet the interest without seriously crippling its financial administration.

All of this raises a series of considerations which I think our Government will have to face, in making up its own mind as to what it is going to do about this aspect of the Mexican problem. When President Cárdenas offered to pay for the small American properties that had been expropriated in Mexico, he did not presume, or intend, that that offer would be the occasion for raising the larger issue which he is not in a position to face for obvious reasons indicated above. He can of course try to come to an understanding with the small property owners themselves, and I suppose that is what he will try to do in the future; but unless we are prepared as a Government to go to extremes, I feel fairly confident that both sides will merely indulge in a series of embittering gestures that will end, as all such gestures have ended in Mexico in the last twenty years, by leaving the  
problem



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problem about where it was when the exercise began. As I have said before, even intervention could end only in our doing what the present Government is doing and paying for it. If I were asked for a policy in the matter, I should say that we ought to encourage the Mexican Government, either by itself or through our intermediation, to make such payments as it can to the people to whom it feels a special responsibility, such as the little fellows, and do nothing to interfere with the broader historical process going on, particularly because we can not interfere even if we want to, and because in the long run Mexico will be a much better neighbor to the United States as a democratic, small-property-owning nation than it was as a feudal system based on large-scale plantations and peonage. I think that in the long run we have much to gain from a friendly, democratic, and peaceful Mexico. Recognizing as I do the very difficult position in which the State Department finds itself and the obvious justice of the demands of Americans for compensation, I have nothing but sympathy for the difficulties of the Department -- but in the long run we may even get some compensation by following a policy of understanding Mexico's difficulties and helping her solve them, rather than by assuming a quite opposite attitude.

I have said almost nothing about the human and humane aspect of the problem, but we ought not to be unmindful, I think, that what they are trying to do by this process is to give themselves some opportunity for the essentials of a decent life: physical freedom from the persecution and abuse which the old plantation system involved; political democracy (in which) Mexico can be based only on a small land-holding system; the privilege of schooling for their children and the opportunity to develop some improved technique in agriculture so as to increase the amount of ordinary food which the people eat. And while such considerations perhaps do not weigh heavily in the scale of justice, we ought not to be unmindful that the problem does not represent just a malicious process of disturbing other people's property rights, but rather the conversion from an anti-democratic to a democratic way of life, at a very heavy cost to all the people involved but probably quite inevitable.

I am sorry I have taken so much time to say so little, and I hope you will forgive me for it. President Cárdenas asked me if I could stop off in Mexico on my way back from Peru in September, which I hope to be able to do, and I shall then give myself the pleasure of seeing you again.

Sincerely yours,

FRANK TANNENBAUM

(Please see next page)



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n.p. & Mexico City, 1936-1941  
To Josephus Daniels  
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P/s:

Perhaps the Mexican situation can best be seen, from the American angle, as a belated process of homesteading which we went through in our own history with the major difference that large areas in our case remained unappropriated, whereas in Mexico they had been appropriated by a few people and in many cases were left untilled and unused.

F.T.

FT:KCT  
Dictated but not read by Mr. Tannenbaum,  
as he was leaving on the noon plane.

