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BORDER AND INTERNATIONAL FRICTION

Along the banks of the Río Grande, from Piedras Negras to Matamoras, within a strip of land which from north to south measured at least one hundred and generally two hundred kilometers, lived a Mexican population that never succeeded in establishing itself either in the territory that was left to Mexico or in the part that was surrendered to Texas in 1848. These people were strong fighting men, daring adventurers, <sup>used</sup> ~~accustomed~~ to hardship and deeply attached to their horses and six shooters.

★ The great length and considerable width of this zone; its wild and desolate aspect; the <sup>absence</sup> ~~lack~~ of an economic activity that would give stable occupation to its inhabitants; its geographical isolation from a weak central government; the rebellious and very personal nature of its local authority; <sup>lies;</sup> its historical background of having belonged for many years to Mexicans; and its lack of a natural <sup>barrier</sup> ~~boundary~~; that could be easily identified as an international boundary; all conspired to make this a troublesome region, difficult to govern and even to subdue by force. The disturbing action of these factors was heightened

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by frequent political disorders--local, regional and national-- and more specifically, by the War of the Reform and the Intervention of 1862.

The situation on the North American side was, if anything, worse. The population was small in relation to the really immense area of Texas. The longest-established inhabitants were Mexican in origin, now American in nationality; but neither their numbers nor wealth lent weight to their belief that they were the ancestral owners of that soil. They were followed in length of residence by the descendants of the original Texan colonists, who barely represented a third of the total. The rest, that is the majority, did not form a homogenous group which would unify the other two; on the contrary they came from all over the United States and from abroad. They had arrived from far and wide with the idea of making a quick fortune in Texas and, therefore, their psychology was one of easy and direct conquest. It should be added that the Civil War had tremendous effects, which were recognized by a writer as deeply and proudly Texan as Webb:

(1) It cannot be denied that Texas was then a lawless land. The Civil War had wrecked the country financially and had left behind a social debris in the place of an organized and well ordered society. When the armies were disbanded, the Confederates drifted back to their homes with a war psychology still on them. For four years or less they had used firearms and had become accustomed to bloodshed and to violent death.

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Although the Reconstruction Period changed this ~~picture~~<sup>picture</sup> ~~situation~~<sup>diminished</sup> somewhat, its benefits were ~~obstructed~~ by new disturbing factors.

All over the South, political parties had degenerated into factions, and Democrat<sup>s</sup> and Republican<sup>s</sup> attacked each other with violence and bitterness. The former tried at all cost to prevent military defeat from turning into lasting political inferiority; the latter was equally determined to transform armed victory into decisive political supremacy. This meant that each local authority invariably belonged to one or another faction, and that it used its political and administrative power to eliminate its rivals.

The Civil War ~~was~~<sup>has been</sup> described by two eminent North American historians as a political revolution that involved both an economic and a social revolution. Certainly, the North American territory west of the ninety-eighth meridian and from Texas north to Canada was practically uninhabited except for Indian "savages" and a few Mormons. The permanent white settler did not reach the Plains, much less the Rocky Mountain region, until the beginning of the 1870's. But once the westward movement began, the wave of immigration gathered such force that by 1890 it had reached the Pacific Coast, and the famous "frontier" had vanished.



Colonization of the Plains required first that the Indians in possession be conquered and then that a railroad be constructed to transport the colonists' products to markets in the East.

Previously, the white man had always dealt with the semi-civilized Indian who roamed the Eastern woodlands and had been exposed to city life. But the Plains Indian was not civilized. He was "wild" or "savage", that is, he knew the white man was his enemy. In the first phase of the struggle, the Indian proved to <sup>be</sup> the stronger: an accomplished horseman, he fell upon his foe like a thunderbolt and disappeared as if by magic. At that time, the warrior who fought unprotected and on horseback on the prairie found the poisoned arrow much more effective than the long rifle, which caused the horse to shy, or the single-shot dueling pistol, which was the white man's only weapon. The Comanches, the best riders of the Western Indians, began to steal horses from the Mexicans who lived in the south of Texas, and by the time a good horse-thief acquired between two hundred and five hundred steeds, every Indian was mounted. For this reason, Webb states that the horse turned the Indian (and he might have added the white man) into ~~a~~ <sup>out</sup> ~~handers,~~ <sup>raiders and</sup> "splendid thieves".



The initial advantages of the Plains Indian quickly disappeared. The white man learned to live on horseback and ride just as skillfully; and he ~~originated~~<sup>adopted</sup> the famous six shooter, a weapon that was far superior to the Indian's poisoned arrow and the Mexican's lance or sword. The white man began by pursuing and slaughtering the buffalo, source of the Indian's food, shelter and clothing. Later he hunted down and destroyed the Indian himself. As a consequence, within ten years only <sup>a</sup> third of the former population of Plains Indians survived.

2 ~~It would be useless to trace in any detail the melancholy story of the Indian relations in the period from 1860 to 1887... It is a tale of intermittent but barbarous warfare, of broken pacts and broken promises, of greed and selfishness, corruption and maladministration, of alternating aggression and vacillation on the part of the whites, and of courageous defense, despair, blind savagery, and inevitable defeat of the Indians.~~

In this dramatic chase, Mexico became a heavensent refuge for the hunted Indian, since the white man on principle stopped at the international border, whereas the Indian unconcernedly crossed it in order to organize on Mexican territory his criminal expeditions into



Texas. In addition, although border Mexicans utilized the Indian for stirring up trouble and for thievery, the latter was inflamed by the white man's persecution. This process was vividly described by one of the chiefs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs:

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... despoiled by irresistible forces, of the land of their fathers; with no country on earth to which they can emigrate; or a people with whom they cannot assimilate; they have no recognized claims upon the government and are compelled to become vagabonds to steal or to starve.

The incredible growth of the cattle kingdom, which was centered in Texas, further complicated the border problem by giving rise to a ~~thriving~~ <sup>prosperous</sup> business in cattle rustling carried on by Mexicans, Texans and Indians. For the new export market, Texan cattle were rounded up in the spring to separate and brand the calves. Afterwards, they were driven long distances, first westward and <sup>then</sup> north, until they reached a cow town like Abilene, Kansas, where they were delivered to a railroad depot for shipment to slaughter and packing houses. In the first of the great

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drives, 35,000 Texas longhorns reached Abilene; but two years later no less than 350,000 made the journey. In the words of Webb, "the drifting herds offered a splendid outlet for stolen cattle and stolen horses". Furthermore, the cattle rustler stole not only for food and to stock a herd of his own, but also to export through Matamoros or Tampico to meat-hungry Cuba.

The crime wave that arose out of this complex, serious and confused situation could not be abated or even checked by anyone or anything, and the people and authorities of Mexico and the United States exchanged accusations and reproaches.

The press and politicians of Texas begged the United States/<sup>government</sup> to send them aid and protection, especially of its army, and they painted a gloomy picture:

Throughout the Valley of the Rio Grande, from the mouth for a distance of two hundred miles up the river, and for one hundred and forty miles back from it, crops and herds had been abandoned, the people dared not travel except in armed parties; civil law outside the towns was suspended, and the sheriffs and judges reported to me that it was unsafe to attempt to execute processes of law outside of towns unless the officers of the law were accompanied by soldiers to protect them.



← A successful solution of a problem of such magnitude and complexity called for a high degree of talent, extreme tact and unflagging patience on the part of not only the local and federal officials of the two countries, but also of the civilian population that had settled on either side of the Río Grande. But frequently man is lacking in talent just when he most needs it.

In 1876 the American government took advantage of the advent of a de facto government in Mexico to make its recognition of that government contingent on the arrangement of all the questions pending between the two countries. Although the list included the perfectly reasonable request that Mexico actively collaborate in "pacifying" the border, it also extended to many other demands of which some were trivial, but others were of great significance to Mexico in the light of the rebellion, independence and annexation of Texas.

For example, Mexico was asked to modify its legislation in order to permit United States citizens to acquire land along the dividing line. It was also proposed that Mexico abolish the "free zone" of Tamaulipas so that Texan merchants would no longer be affected by the



smuggling carried on from that zone. As for the really urgent problem of "pacifying" the border, the governments of Texas and the United States declared that Mexico did not want to cooperate and that even were it willing, it was too weak and disorganized to be effective.

In these circumstances the United States found an easy remedy: its federal forces would miraculously do away with cattle rustlers, outlaws and Indians, provided it received permission from the Mexican government to pursue, catch and kill them on the latter's territory. In the face of the Mexican government's refusal, the president of the United States ordered his troops to go ahead anyway.

This very dangerous situation, which more than once brought the two countries to the verge of general <sup>war</sup> ~~hostilities~~, only lasted three years; but its effects lasted much longer, in fact, thirty-five years.

In 1867, having emerged victorious from the Intervention, Mexico broke relations and abrogated its treaties with France, England and Spain because by recognizing the Empire of Maximilian they had ~~not~~ not recognized the Republic. And, finally, <sup>it</sup> ~~he~~ announced that it was prepared to resume diplomatic relations on the condition that the European powers would demonstrate their desire to renew them and negotiate new treaties.

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Thus, in 1867 Mexico had relations with no country in the world except the United States; that is, internationally it was almost completely isolated. ~~xxx~~ Nevertheless, Mexico---according to a French witness--- appeared satisfied and saw no special danger in its chosen lot. And it saw no danger precisely because, among other reasons, the United States gratuitously and insistently preached to it that such isolation was dangerous and needed to be broken. The United States did not limit itself to preaching; it also offered <sup>and exercised</sup> its good offices for renewing relations with Germany, Italy, Spain and France.

But when in 1876 border incidents led to a refusal <sup>to</sup> ~~to~~ recognize the government of Porfirio Díaz unless all pending questions were settled and to the ordering of North American troops into Mexican territory to "pacify" the border, Mexico became acutely aware that, just as the United States had preached, it was very dangerous to depend on relations with only one country, that is, to depend on the friendship of the United States. Since then, until the fall of Porfirio Díaz in 1911, ~~xxxxx~~ a cardinal principle of Mexico's foreign policy has been to seek Europe's friendship and aid in order to counteract the political and economic influence of the United States.



Border friction, in brief, taught Mexico a bitter lesson, but one it profited by. The United States should also have learned a healthy lesson from this; but, in reality, it still does not realize the significance or the existence of such a lesson.