

JOSEPH HENDERSON, THE MEXICO READER
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A Conservative Profession of Faith

The Editors of El Tiempo, February 12, 1846

Even before it was fought, the war between the United States and Mexico would become the crucible for Mexican nationhood. As Mexico moved ever closer to war, Liberals and Conservatives, both painfully aware of Mexico's centrifugal tendencies, its chronic debility, its poverty, and its political paralysis, groped for explanations. For Conservatives, the problem was quite simply republicanism, an insidious virus that had infected the national organism and weakened the noble Hispanic legacy of monarchism and Roman Catholicism.

El Tiempo was the most important newspaper of conservatism, and its editorial board included the most illustrious Conservatives of the mid-nineteenth century. In the following excerpt, written two months before the outbreak of the war—a time of high tensions—the newspaper's editors eloquently and succinctly stake out their position.

We promised to publish a complete and explicit manifesto of our political principles. We shall now fulfill our promise....

We believe that our independence was a grand and glorious feat, and also a necessary and inevitable one. When kingdoms and provinces which are far from the metropolis reach a certain level of development and growth, when the culture has created interests and the capacity to govern, then the time has come to loosen the ties that bind the young nations to the more ancient and advanced ones, which, like mothers, gave them their education and strength, initiating them into the life of civilization. So independence had to come sooner or later, and though ten years of cruel wars could not secure it, a military movement of seven months in 1821 was enough to make the words of Iguala the country's banner. Why? Because the guarantees contained in that plan united all spirits, all sympathies; because the clergy, the army, and the people were assured of a future full of glory and prosperity for the fatherland. That is why many Spanish priests, military men and merchants remained in Mexico, performing their tasks and services; that is why this important revolution was not consumed by blood and ruin, and why independence united

so many sentiments. It was because the general welfare was considered, and because the ties that bound past and present and future were loosened but not broken.

The plan of Iguala was not carried out. Iturbide wished to create a dynasty for his own benefit; and this empire, lacking foundation, lacking legitimacy, lacking respect for time and tradition, fell into ruins at the first revolutionary stirrings. The lamentable tragedy that took Iturbide's life, took from the fatherland a faithful servant who was misled by inexperience and dazzled by flattery. The United States then began to build an empire of a different sort in Mexico: its books and ideas, the promises made by its representatives, the fraudulent spectacle of its prosperity, dragged our noble trustful nature down new and dangerous roads. Republican ideas took control of the nation's destiny, and were formulated into government.

We then started down this fatal path upon which we still walk. Overlooking our differences of origin, of religion, and of history, without considering that our social, political, and religious unity made us best suited for the monarchical form of government—just as the Americans are suited for republicanism and federalism by their diversity of cults, peoples, and languages—we believed that the quickest way to assure political liberty was to throw ourselves into the arms of the United States, servilely imitating its institutions and slavishly following its perfidious advice. Thus, the absurd constitution of 1824 was written, and the American representative¹ founded, in the name of liberty, secret societies which tyrannized and destroyed the country. The treasury was disorganized, administration was ruined. We should have had enough resources to satisfy all of our ambitions, but the people's wealth was squandered, and we began to contract increasingly ruinous loans. The nation was weakened by the expulsion of the peaceful and hardworking Spaniards, along with their Mexican families and the immense wealth that they possessed. Civil liberty was drowned amid continuous revolts, which turned a disciplined and long-suffering army into a tool of ambition and anarchy. Presidents and Congresses fell before bloody revolutions. From that time, civil war in the countryside and disorder in the cities practically became our normal state. Meanwhile, barbarous Indians dared to pillage our territory with impunity, and the United States grabbed Texas and prepared to usurp California.

This description is not exaggerated: official documents, speeches by the country's representatives, articles in the newspapers—all present a much grimmer picture of our situation.

So, what do we now contemplate? What is the situation within and outside of the country?

An administration disorganized, a treasury lost, enormous debts that con-

sume us, revenues pledged to our creditors, the soldier begging the usurer for his scant subsistence, justice neglected, barbarians threatening the borders of our civilization, Yucatán emancipated, the United States occupying our territory; and all this without a navy with which to defend our coasts, and without the power to allocate the resources that our valiant army would need to expel the zealous invaders from the nation's soil.

And what about overseas?

Our reputation in Europe is lost: one is accustomed to hearing about the perpetual scandal of our revolutions, and we are seen as a nation condemned to the fate of the turbulent and semi-barbarous republics of the south, or one destined to be the prisoner and slave of the federation of the North. This country, so rich in natural resources, no longer has credit in any market; and the instability of our governments discredits our institutions, obstructing any political alliance that we might establish in Europe to help us resist invasions from the United States. No nation will sign treaties with the unfortunate republics of Spanish America, which are condemned by fate to wallow in anarchy and convulsion; where diplomacy is impossible, secrets impracticable; where neither treasons nor guarantees exist or can exist within its precarious governments.

Very well, then. We know this sad situation and, unlike many others, we do not try to deceive our country. Since the Mexican nation has the greatest elements of grandeur and prosperity of any nation in the world, and since men here, like men everywhere, are made by education, institutions and habits, we do not believe and do not repeat the vulgar notion that we are incapable of political existence, or that we cannot govern ourselves. We believe that republican institutions have brought us to a state close to despair and prostration, just as they would have done to Spain, England, and France. We believe that at the present time we are not merely heading for ruin, demoralization, and anarchy; we are approaching the complete dissolution of the nation, and the loss of our territory, our name, and our independence.

Holland, France, England have, in bygone epochs, experimented with republicanism, and, in order to survive, they shook off that political form with disgust and fear, for it undermined their existence just as it does ours. In those countries, republican revolutions left glorious, if not prosperous, memories. Holland freed itself from the Spanish yoke and built up a navy. England, under the iron-fisted administration of Cromwell, conquered Dunkirk and Jamaica. France made Europe tremble, and in its revolutionary delirium brought its tricolored banner triumphantly to Germany, Italy and Switzerland. The three nations, nonetheless, were consumed by internal divisions, and they sought the remedy for their ills in monarchy. Today these brilliant and fertile civiliza-

tions enjoy all the benefits of liberty and order, and they see their vain utopias as a foolish delirium: the republican parties no longer exist; they are dead. Where are the educated men who still proclaim republican doctrines in those free countries?

But if the republic could not take root in those countries, then what will become of Mexico, where we have experienced nothing but humiliation and disaster? Instead of conquering foreign territories, the eternal dissensions of our republic have caused us to lose Texas and Yucatán,² both of which pertained to Mexico when we began our independence. Every day, instead of triumphing over our enemies, we are threatened with the loss of more territory: the French flag has waved over Uliá and Veracruz, the American stars float above the Rio Bravo [or Rio Grande, as it is known in the United States]. The republic has created nothing; it has destroyed everything; and our proud national character chafes at the impotence to which our great country has been reduced.

We repeat that it is for this reason that we believe the republic has been a costly experiment, a harsh warning; but it might still be remedied. Now, if you ask what we want and desire, we will say it frankly. We want Representative Monarchy; we want National Unity; we want order along with political and civil liberty; we want the integrity of Mexican territory; we want, in the end, all of the promises and guarantees of the Plan of Iguala, in order to ensure that our glorious independence has stable foundations. If the most advanced and civilized countries of the world have, after lengthy convulsions, adopted a certain form of government, then that form of government is suitable for us. It is what the army at Iguala and its heroic caudillo promised would lead to our happiness and prevent our destruction; it is toward this that we wish to move; it is what we long for, what we defend.

We want a regimen of government in which justice is administered with impartiality, because it is independent of all parties; in which the government has the stability and strength to protect society, and where the laws, respected by everyone, guarantee the rights of all citizens. We want a regimen in which chambers are elective and royal power is hereditary, in order to ensure both political liberty and to maintain the existing order. We want an order of things that regularizes commerce, protects industry, develops the intellectual activity of the nation, and in whose ordered hierarchy all eminent men shall have a place.

We want what exists in all of the respected monarchies of Europe, where there is no aristocracy other than one of merit, skill, education, wealth, and military and civil service; where a man is not asked who his parents are, but what he has done to make himself worthy of positions and honors.

We want a strong and vigorous army that can cover itself with laurels by nobly defending its country, in which military hierarchies are respected and those who shed their blood for the fatherland receive the consideration they are due; we want that army to win victories overseas, and we want the soldier to be assured of a comfortable and stable retirement after his difficult life, not the abandonment and misery with which revolutions reward his services.

We want decorous and dignified support for the Catholic cult of our fathers, not the anarchy that continually threatens Church property. We were born into the bosom of the Church, and we do not wish to see the cathedrals of our religion become temples of those sects that scandalize the world with their religious complaints; nor do we wish to see the hateful starry banner flying from their towers.

We want a representative monarchy that can protect the distant regions as well as those nearby, defend them against the assaults of savages, and extend the borders of civilization that are besieged by barbarism. We want a stable government that inspires confidence in Europe, making possible overseas alliances that might help us to resist the United States, if it persists in trying to destroy our nationality.

All of the legal parties can find a place around this banner, so long as they wish to see the independence and liberty of the country affirmed; so long as they want our sad and unfortunate fatherland to become the premier nation of America. We have faith in our country's future, in its aggrandizement; and we do not believe that so vast, so rich, and so privileged a territory must always be prisoner to dissolution and anarchy.

But we do not want reaction of any sort. Conservatives of conviction and character, we ask protection for all interests regardless of their origin. It is madness to believe that a prince of royal blood should come to Mexico to establish a dynasty with the support of foreign governments. Such a thing could have happened three centuries ago, but it cannot happen today, especially in a country with representative government. We do not want a single job or a single military rank that is not in Mexican hands: whoever hopes to bring stability to our country must be supported only by the army and by the Mexican people.

We have completed our profession of Faith. It is at last clear and complete. Convinced that our ideas are the only ones that can save the nation, we sustain them with decorum and civility, but also with determination and energy. We are not at all disturbed by the calumnies which always follow those who fight against disorder, prejudice and abuse: we scorn the calumniators and we carry on our work without fear. What is certain is that we will never be ac-

complices of foreign ambition, and, in our newspaper, the stars of the United States will never eclipse the colors of our national flag.

Notes

1. A reference to Joel Poinsett, the first American ambassador to Mexico, who helped to found the liberal York Rite Masonic Lodge, and whose views on Mexicans appear in this volume's first section. *Ed.*
2. Following the example of Texas and repelled by Santa Anna's highly centralist Constitution of 1836, the remote state of Yucatán, which had always had tenuous relations with Mexico, declared its independence in 1840. It rejoined Mexico in 1843, then separated again in 1845, but reunited with Mexico permanently in 1848, while in the throes of a bloody race war. *Ed.*

Considerations Relating to the

Political and Social Situation of the

Mexican Republic in the Year 1847

Mariano Otero

Liberals had their own explanations for Mexico's woes. Whereas the Conservatives felt that Mexico had grown weak to the extent that it had deviated from the examples of its mother country, Liberals insisted that many of the unfortunate remnants of the colonial system were to blame. Mexico, if it were to prosper, would have to make itself more, not less, like the "modern" nations of the world.

Undoubtedly one of the most eloquent and unflinching spokesmen for the Liberal view was Mariano Otero (1817–1850). Otero was widely read in political philosophy. He served in the national Congress and, for a brief time, in the cabinet of President José Joaquín Herrera as secretary of the interior and of foreign relations. Like the editors of El Tiempo, Otero was staunchly nationalistic and eager to find a solution to Mexico's continuing vulnerability. Yet unlike those Conservatives, he found his country's weakness had less to do with the particular system in place (that is, a monarchy vs. a republic) than with the realities of the social and psychological makeup of Mexico and Mexicans.

The fact that a foreign army of ten or twelve thousand men should have penetrated from Veracruz to the very capital of the republic: the fact that, with the exception of the bombarding of that port, the action at Cerro Gordo, and the minor encounters that it had with Mexican troops in the immediate environs of the capital, this army has not found enemies with whom to fight—while it has swept across three of the most important and populous states of the Mexican federation, states with more than two million inhabitants—these facts assume such proportions that they cannot but give rise to the most serious reflections.

Petty-minded men, those who judge events solely on the occurrences themselves, usually fall into serious error. For this reason it is not strange that, as

we have already seen in some foreign journals, the Mexican people have been characterized as *an effeminate people, a degenerate race that does not know how to govern or to defend itself*.

But the man of thought . . . cannot consider the Mexican republic in its present sad situation to be composed of a people who suffer from defective origins through the effeminacy or degradation of their race but rather of a people who have been the victims of a defective education and a worse organization. From this point of view, we believe that Mexico, far from deserving the deprecation and mockery of the other nations, merits, if not the assistance which as a nation it might hope for from the other nations of the world in the name of universal justice, at least the sympathy which any good heart should feel toward a nation that sustains a just cause. . . .

We will not exhaust ourselves in useless protestations. . . . Instead, let a simple account of the component parts that make up the nation suffice to explain its present situation. . . . [W]e might calculate the population as reaching seven million, of whom, according to the least exaggerated reports, four million are Indians and three million Europeans, mixed, for the most part, with the indigenous strain.

The Indians are spread throughout the entire territory of the republic, grouped in small communities and forming really a family apart from the white and mixed races. The miserable way of life of the Indians today differs little or not at all from what it was when they were subjects of the great emperor Montezuma. . . . Neither in the time of the viceroys nor later, after independence, has there been adopted an adequate system of education for this race, an education which would on the one hand improve the condition of the individual, raising him from the brutalized state in which he exists, and on the other hand make him useful to society. Neither early nor late have these people been taught anything more than to fear God, the priest, and the mayor, and the ignorance in which they live is such that perhaps three quarters of the Indians have not yet received the news of the attainment of national independence. That they remain in this error is all the more credible in view of the fact that in many places they are still charged tribute for the king of Spain in the same spirit in which they are asked for donations for the ransoming of captives and for the holy places of Jerusalem.

The work that they are generally put to is cultivating the earth for a small daily stipend, and since this pay is not always sufficient to cover the costs of their sad existence, they often ask the owner of the hacienda on which they work for wages in advance to be paid back by their labor, thus obliging them to stay put until they have paid their debt. . . .

In addition, there is a system which *so happily* prevails among the Mexican

clergy by which, while the so-called higher clergy and bishops live opulently in the capital, the parish priests find that their very survival depends upon the income from their parish *rights*. For this reason, these representatives of the God of goodness and mercy make it a point not to allow any Indian to be born, to marry, or to die with impunity, that is, without paying the *established rights*. In this way, the parish priests take their cut from the scant resources that the Indians count on for their livelihood.

Those Indians who live close to the great population centers go to them to sell vegetables, poultry, firewood, coal, and other such goods which fetch them a small price, but even this paltry sum is further reduced by the cut taken at the city gate by collectors who, in the name of the nation, commit against these people the most infamous and repugnant extortions.

To put the finishing touch on this canvas, which faithfully portrays the sadness of Indian life, we need but add that the only active part that the Indians take in the public life of the country is to serve as soldiers in the army, a role which is forced upon them. And in this capacity, rather than serving their country, they act as instruments for the aggrandizement of their officers, who in times of peace give them little bread but a big stick (*poco pan y mucho palo*) and in war often abandon them at the moment of danger. For all these reasons, it is easy to understand why this important sector of the population has no interest in preserving an order of things of which it is the victim. Certainly the Indians have watched the entrance of the North American army with the same indifference with which they watched in the past the Spanish armies taking dominion of the country, and with the same calm with which, after independence, they have watched the comings and goings of our troops engaged in continual revolutions. Without any further necessities than those demanded by their semi-savage level of existence, without relationships or pleasures of any kind which might arise out of a contact with society, with neither interests nor affections that tie them to it, and with the confidence that their abject condition could not be worsened, they look upon all that might happen with the most apathetic indifference.

We shall now proceed to examine the 3 million inhabitants of European or mixed descent who comprise the populations of the capitals and other cities and towns of importance in the republic. . . . With the exception of about three hundred thousand men, the top figure for those employed in agriculture, industry, mining, business, and certain trades and offices, the nine hundred thousand remaining account for the unproductive classes, such as the clergy with all of its subordinates and dependents, the military, the bureaucracy, lawyers, doctors, and finally that multitude of loafers and vagabonds that abounds in the main cities of the republic.

From this unexaggerated estimate, we might judge the sad situation that afflicts that quarter of the population which works and produces and therefore must necessarily support the other three quarters. What an enormous disproportion! Here is the origin of the backwardness and discouragement encumbering all sources of the national wealth. Here is sufficient cause for the destruction of the nascent Mexican republic; indeed, it would suffice to destroy the most flourishing nation on earth! . . .

There is little good to be said about the standing of those Mexicans who dedicate themselves to the skills and trades. Unfortunately, there still persists among us the error inherited from the Spaniards who, with their lofty notions of chivalry and nobility, taught us to look down upon any man who follows a trade. To be a man of respectability it was necessary to be a military man, a government official, a clergyman, a lawyer, or at least a doctor. All others in society were considered to be the inferior classes, and even businessmen were looked upon with contempt, being referred to as rag dealers. As a result of such ridiculous, not to say pernicious ideas, no father of any means, however moderate, wanted, nor still does want, his sons to learn a trade. He would even be ashamed to apprentice them to a commercial house or to any other business, because the idea of *serving a master*, as the saying goes, whether in a workshop or in a store, would seem to him to be a very denigrating thing.

This concern about status reaches such a proportion that many artisans who have lived decent and honorable lives in their trades, far from teaching them to their sons, put them in a college to learn law or medicine; or, as soon as they get out of school knowing something of reading, writing, and arithmetic, they try to get some influential person to prevail upon the government to bestow upon [their] sons a civil or military post. . . . There are many fathers also who, before apprenticing their sons to any trade, would prefer that they had no profession at all and would abandon them to the fate of searching out their livelihood in any way that *God might give them to understand*, but without, of course, giving up their status as gentlemen—*hombres decentes*—that is to say, without working at any job that might dishonor them, because for this class of men working itself is dishonorable, and they do not think that this is true of spending their entire lives as vagabonds and swindlers.

And so it has come about that, while the republic is plagued by hundreds of generals, thousands of superintendents and officials, bureaucrats, clergymen, and doctors, one cannot find a single distinguished Mexican in any art, skill, or trade; and it is certain that, in any of the important population centers, the best architect, the most able painter, the best sculptor, the best carriage maker, the most intelligent upholsterer, the most painstaking cabinet maker, and even the best cobbler will turn out not to be a Mexican but a foreigner.

This is a truth all the more sad when one considers that there is no lack of ability among the Mexicans and that they are even famous for their skills in making fine reproductions. . . .

In view of this simple and true account of the state in which the productive classes — the smallest part of the Mexican republic — find themselves, it is easy to understand the sense of permanent malaise in which they live. And this, in turn, sufficiently explains the detachment and indifference with which these classes, on the whole, have looked upon the present war through which the republic is suffering. Say what one might, patriotism, that noble and chivalrous sentiment which in other countries moves the people and raises them to such a pitch of fervor that they would a thousand times prefer death to permitting the slightest offense against their country — that sentiment cannot exist in a country without education and in one which has been lacerated by thirty-seven years of travail and misery. . . .

The men who have figured in the directing of our public affairs have shown neither the proper science nor the consciousness of the great duties imposed upon them by the high posts that their ambitions have elevated them to. None of them have shown the least concern for the removal of those strong obstacles to the welfare and happiness of the nation. All of this is very natural in a country where men never ascend to power through the free vote of the citizenry but are always placed there either through intrigues on the part of one or another faction or, as is often the case, by revolutionary action on the part of the armed forces.

This system, certainly original in a republic, of presenting the people with their rulers without first consulting them and obtaining their consent, has necessarily resulted in the emergence of picked officials whose least concern is with the welfare of the people. It could not be otherwise in view of the fact that the parties, which represent this or that special interest, do not seek in their candidates independent men devoted to the general interest of the country but rather men who will adhere strictly to the special interests of [their] party. Accordingly, these same men in taking power feel obligated to honor their commitment to serve faithfully the party that elevated them to office.

For these reasons we have seen that some governments have decidedly protected the army, others the clergy, others the bureaucrats, and some others all three classes at once. However, there has never been a government which has put a brake on the pretensions of the privileged classes while reforming or destroying their abuses. None has dedicated itself to the protection of the industrious classes which most merit the attention of any government that would be enlightened or patriotic. For these classes there has been nothing but pompous promises which have never been fulfilled. In order to discredit

the government which they have wanted to overthrow, factions in revolt have hurled charges to the effect that this government has not protected industry or commerce. . . .

One would have to concede that such a system, practiced for twenty-six years, could only bring about the most profound disgust between the industrious classes and their governments. What bonds or sympathies could possibly exist between these classes and the various governments, considering that the latter, instead of lending them some support, have burdened them daily with more taxes of all kinds in order to satisfy the ambitions of thousands of men of the privileged classes who, with no decent title to it, have proposed to live at the expense of the nation? None, certainly. . . .

As the inevitable result of so many cruel and repeated deceptions, [the productive classes] are now in a state of mortal discouragement. This being the case, could anyone maintain that they should now go on to sacrifice what remains of their fortunes as well as their very lives for their country? And in defense of what? . . .

To these definite considerations, which should certainly suffice to explain, at least to enlightened men, the apathy which has characterized most members of the industrious classes during the present war, should be added the observation that the United States army has not [spread] terror and death everywhere, robbing or destroying property, violating women, and, in short, perpetrating all kinds of crimes against the conquered populace. On the contrary . . . the American army, sustaining itself on its own resources and paying good prices for whatever it needed for its subsistence, has respected private property. No peaceful Mexican has been persecuted. Everyone has been allowed to continue working freely in his trade or occupation. And finally, far from oppressing the people with heavy taxes, the American army has considerably reduced import duties in the occupied ports, and in the cities and towns of the interior; [moreover], it has abolished the customs houses and tax-collecting stations which had formerly vexed and harassed all who sought their livelihoods in the mercantile trades. . . .

Can it be demanded of the property-owning and industrious Mexicans that they bring about their own ruin or even death in defense of those same abuses of which they are the victims? . . . And yet, despite all these reasons cited, the industrious classes of Mexico have, in fact, given no little proof of the extent to which they esteem the honor and good name of their country. . . .

It now remains for us to consider the three classes which are the true masters of the country: the army, the clergy, and the government bureaucracy. Since these are the only groups that have enjoyed its privileges and have decreed, according to their whims, its fate, it would seem that they should have

taken on the present battle as a personal cause, being well persuaded that in any new and enlightened order of things all those abuses by which they have lived up until now would, undoubtedly, be swept away. However, in examining the particular modus of these classes among themselves, we shall see that—although they have been very potent in imposing upon the country a static condition, heading it in the direction of total ruin—they have been utterly without force when it has come to uniting against a foreign invasion, convinced though they must be that that thrust will be more fatal to them than to the rest of the country. . . .

We will start with the army because this class is the most immediately responsible for the loss of national honor, for whose defense this same army has been continually maintained at a cost to the country of millions of pesos in the twenty-six years that have elapsed from independence to the present.

We have said elsewhere that the soldiers, in general, are Indians, forcibly made to serve, and we have also observed that these Indians have little or no conception of nationality, and no interest whatever in maintaining an order of things in which they figure only as beasts of burden. Nevertheless, it must be truthfully said that as soldiers they are really quite good, because—aside from not being cowards—they have great endurance in the campaign. They have shown that they can cross hundreds of leagues over bad roads, barefoot, badly clothed and worse fed, and this without complaining or committing any notable act of insubordination. Without doubt, if these same Indians were led by officers with good training and some sensibility, they would be as good as the soldiers of any other country. The trouble, therefore, with the Mexican army is not with the soldiers but with the officers, who, with a few and honorable exceptions, are assuredly the most ignorant and demoralized on earth. Nor could it be otherwise, when the attainment of military rank among us has nothing to do with competence or valor but rather with appointments based on the most contemptible favoritism.

From the time in which we gained our independence, a multitude of obscure and ignorant men have been presenting themselves to the new government, alleging the important services and immense sacrifices that they are supposed to have made in defense of the national cause, and asking to be given, in recompense for these services, high military posts. . . . In this way men were brought into the army who had had no previous experience of military service and were absolutely ignorant of the art of war and therefore worthless in terms of the careers they were presumed to be following. Later, the abuse of handing out military posts reached such a point of scandal that any Mexican who would consent to remain a peasant would seem to be posi-

tively admirable, so easy had it become for anyone who wanted a military post to get one.

Above all, during twenty years of this kind of thing, the favorite occupation of the army has been, with but a few intervals, the making of revolution. Consequently, the disorder within the military has reached its culmination. Every new government, elevated to power through a military revolt—as they all have been—has felt obliged to immediately reward that part of the army which installed it, and thus preferments are awarded to all the leaders and officers of that faction. On the other hand, the government that was about to fall had given new posts to the other part of the army that had remained faithful to it before its fall. These last-minute promotions have always been recognized by the new government in order to keep everybody happy. In this way, each revolution has resulted in a swelling of the officer corps and at the same time in a new wave of promotions for those officers already in grade. In the light of this, it should not appear at all strange that those farces known as *promociones* should recur so frequently, because it is clear that by this route a former second lieutenant, for example, who has taken part in six consecutive revolutions, will undoubtedly have made it to the rank of general. . . .

As a consequence of so much disorder and also of the facile appointments and promotion of officers, it is not surprising that one can hardly find, although there are hundreds of generals, thousands of colonels, lieutenant colonels, commanders, and so forth, a single general in whom one would confide the command of a small division, because many of them do not even know the rudiments of the art of war, and they would be in a dilemma should they be put in charge of a company on patrol. Also, one could count on the fingers of the hand the number of colonels in whom one could trust the command of a single regiment in combat; and finally, as for junior officers, there are very few good ones because, along with their other defects, they are given to insubordination, which makes them useless for any sort of service.

One is forced to conclude that such an army, when faced with its first national war against a foreign army that is at least tolerably well organized, is bound to play the same ridiculous role that was played by the Pope's soldiers before the armies of Napoleon.

It is not in the least difficult to count the number of defeats which our army has suffered in the present war. One has only to know beforehand how many engagements it has had with the enemy, because each battle has been a defeat, with some of the skirmishes lasting only a few minutes. But, however disgraced our military has been at arms, it has not been sparing in giving out proclamations, manifestos, and explanations to the public, because, on the

"literary" side, our army surely has no equal in the world. There are generals who have felt called upon to issue a proclamation upon taking charge of their troops. This has been followed by another proclamation each time they have passed through a city or town en route. They even make proclamations, upon getting out of bed in the morning, to their valiant comrades in arms. . . .

This total lack of truth and justice naturally discourages all good officers, or perhaps converts them into bad ones because in the present scheme of things even the basic motives for human action are missing: the hope of reward and the fear of punishment.

Furthermore, in all well-organized societies an officer knows that should he die in battle his family, at least, will be taken care of by the government, and if he should be incapacitated he can count on a soldier's home where he can pass the rest of his life comfortably and decently. In Mexico these things do not obtain. Though a veterans' institution and a pension fund for military widows exist in name, any incapacitated veteran can be sure that he will perish, at the end, in utter poverty, after having begged for his subsistence from public charity. If, on the other hand, he is killed in action, his family will without doubt be the victims of misery or of the prostitution which is its consequence, and his cadaver will serve as meat for the birds and animals because frequently, if not always, it is allowed to remain stretched out on the field of battle without anyone taking the trouble to bury it. . . .

Let us go on now to examine the situation of the clergy, in whose hands resides the largest portion of the property of the republic—a fact which accounts for the great and baneful influence the clergy has exercised upon society. In view of this vast ownership, it would seem only natural that the clergy would ardently defend the nation or, more precisely, these same properties, being persuaded that any other even half-enlightened government that establishes itself in the country must necessarily despoil it of all these immense holdings and reduce it to the simple exercise of its purely spiritual mission upon earth. The clergy should be the more determined to resist with all its capacities the advance of the enemy forces because this army represents a people for which the absolute toleration of various religions forms the very basis of its social system. This being so, it is evident that should Mexico succumb in the fight the clergy here would not only have to fear the loss of its material interests but also of that sole and absolute power which it has exercised without opposition in a country in which no other religion but theirs is tolerated.

In view of all this, the blind self-centeredness which the clergy has shown in a cause that one would have thought to have been its very own would seem inexplicable were it not for two considerations. The first of these is the very

ignorance of the individuals involved, by which they have shown themselves to be incapable of comprehending the difficult times in which they are living, being unable to foresee the dire consequences which lie in store for them as a result of the stupidity and egotism of their present conduct. Secondly, and more importantly, one must consider the inequality that exists within this privileged class itself, by which a small minority lives surrounded by the greatest abundance while the rest are left with hardly enough to sustain themselves in a decent manner. One has only to survey the disproportion that exists among the various groups making up the clergy in order to substantiate the exactness of these observations.

The Mexican clergy consists of bishops and canons, curates and vicars, private clerics or chaplains, and members of religious orders—of both sexes. The bishops and canons, who make up what is known as the high clergy, are supported by tithes. Although the income from this source has been reduced a good deal since the workers have been relieved of the obligation to pay them, it is still a considerable sum. . . . In the great cities such as Mexico City, Puebla, Guadalajara, Querétaro, Orizaba, and others, there is a multitude of clergy who are quite useless, and in these same cities the bishops and canons lead comfortable and even sumptuous lives, remote from all inconveniences and enjoying all the pleasures that riches can provide. In contrast, those who really give a service to religion, the curates and vicars, with rare exceptions, must endure lives overburdened with work and destitute, sometimes to the point of sheer misery. . . .

The parish priests suffer all kinds of privations, being constantly on call and having to travel long distances to say mass and dispense the sacraments in remote places. Sunday, the day of rest for all others, is their heaviest day. Yet for all this travail they receive only the donations that might be forthcoming from the faithful for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and so forth. As observance of these sacraments is on the decline, so too is the livelihood of the poor parish priests. . . .

As for the bureaucrats, their history is very similar to that of the military. Amidst the perpetual disorder and dissolution of our governments, nevertheless, public jobs continue to be handed out in great profusion—perhaps to truckle to this or that personage who has made a recommendation or maybe to reward the slightest service given to one of the people in government. Sel-dom, or very rarely, is there an effort to establish the honesty or capacity of the person being considered for a job, but what is certainly taken into account is whether the recommender has some degree of influence. Once this is established, the applicant is, of course, given a position—without further

inquiry. There are also many cases of important jobs being obtained through the donation of money to those who have access to the government and enjoy its favor.

The result of this facile manner of handing out jobs is that there are many people in public employment who cannot handle the grammar of their own language or do simple arithmetic, nor can they write at even a medium level of proficiency. As for morality, the examples are as many as they are scandalous of employees who have made tremendous fortunes, abusing the confidence which the government has so ineptly reposed in them. Corruption of this kind has become so well-established and generally accepted—even in society—that nobody is scandalized to see a public employee who earns an annual salary of between two or three thousand pesos buy himself *haciendas*, furnish his townhouse with the most exquisite and costly appointments, and generally maintain his family at an extravagant level of luxury. None of this attracts any attention because such cases are innumerable, and the public has become accustomed to seeing that all employees—with very few exceptions—who have any access to public funds spend three or four times more than they earn.

Despite this scandalous corruption and ineptitude on the part of most bureaucrats, the government, even if it wants to, is powerless to remedy the situation. According to the laws of the Republic, the employee who is given a government office acquires in the act of being hired a *property*, which nobody, not even the government itself, can deprive him of without establishing just cause. The posing of this condition, given the way justice is administered in the country, is tantamount to declaring that the bureaucrats can do anything they want, secure in the knowledge that nothing will dislodge them from their jobs. . . .

Moreover, a dismissed employee, no matter how justified the government might have been in discharging him, is always well received by the opposite party, whose newspapers immediately begin a clamor against the *horrible attempt* on the part of the government to attack the employee's property without respect for due process of law. The government accused of taking such an action is branded as arbitrary, despotic, and tyrannical. . . .

From the above it would seem that the best office one could aspire to in Mexico would be that of government employee, and in effect these employees would have veritable sinecures if it were not for the fact that their very excess in number jeopardizes their situation as a group. In those countries that boast some kind of order, the number of employees hired corresponds to the number needed for specific offices; but in Mexico, where everything tends to go in reverse, the offices are created to accommodate the employees. . . .

For all these reasons, it can be seen that in this class of government employees, as with the military and the clergy, there does not exist, nor can there exist, an *esprit de corps*. Consequently, although this group is potentially strong enough to put a great deal of pressure upon society, it does not have the incentive to promote its individual interests by resort to concerted action, not even in defense of the very abuses upon which it thrives.

We have now brought to a conclusion this sad description of the state in which all classes of society in the republic now find themselves. . . . To discover that we have been guilty of error would indeed be cause for celebration, because we are, after all, Mexicans and would like nothing better than to see our fatherland happy and respected throughout the world; but we cannot indulge in illusions, and we do not believe that, in the picture we have traced of our society, we have told anything but those truths which nobody can deny, because they are visible to all who, free of emotional bias or delusion, are willing to see the reality of things.

Therefore, it seems utterly useless for foreign writers to seek feverishly such explanations as the *feminization or degradation of the Mexican race* in order to account for the indifference which this nation has shown toward the present war. It is equally ridiculous for Mexicans to engage in mutual recrimination over what has happened. For our part, we believe that everything is to be explained in these few words: IN MEXICO THERE IS NOT, NOR IS THERE A POSSIBILITY OF DEVELOPING A NATIONAL SPIRIT, BECAUSE THERE IS NO NATION. In effect, if a nation cannot call itself such without having all the elements that make for its happiness and well being internally while being at the same time respected abroad, then Mexico cannot properly call itself a nation.

It is useless to point out that the Mexican Republic possesses an immense territory of more than [840,000 square miles], bathed by two great oceans, with a multitude of navigable rivers, with the most varied climates in which all the fruits of the globe can be produced, with virgin territories whose astonishing fertility gives the farmer practically a 100 percent yield; where, as a culmination to the special bounty bestowed upon this land, there are great hills and mountains loaded with the most precious metals. All of this only serves to prove that this country has all the natural elements to make up a great and happy nation and that in the passage of time, on this very ground that we now tread upon, there will be a people who will without doubt occupy one of the prime positions among the most rich and powerful nations of the earth. But as long as fanaticism, ignorance, and laziness continue being the basis of our education and as long as we do not have a government which is truly enlightened and energetic, taking all the measures necessary to ensure the advancement of this society, the Mexican people, although treading

on gold and silver, will be a weak and unfortunate people and will continue to present to the world the humiliating spectacle of a beggar emaciated by misery and hunger, living in a beautiful palace full of gold and all types of riches which he does not know how to make use of, not even for his own well being and happiness.

Liberals and the Land

Luis González y González (1925–2003)

Following the war with the United States and several more years of turmoil, a new, younger generation of Liberals, including Ignacio Comonfort, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, and Benito Juárez, came to power/determined to enact sweeping reforms that they hoped would propel their country headlong into the modern world. After seizing power in the Revolution of Ayutla (1854) — which overthrew Santa Anna for the last time — they immediately issued a series of decrees that came to be known collectively as “La Reforma” (the period of Reform) and would have long-range, and some dire, consequences. Among other things, they sought to transform Mexico’s agriculture. Their failure to realize their dream of creating an enterprising, modern, scientific countryside, as we shall see, would be a major factor in the genesis of the Mexican revolution of 1910.

In the following selection, one of Mexico’s most eminent social historians explains the problems the Liberals sought to overcome, what they hoped to accomplish, and why, in the end, they failed.

The creed of the Reform was defined on the same day the insurgents of Ayutla began calling themselves “Liberals,” and the paladins of the Santa Anna dictatorship Conservatives and “crabs.” That creed borrowed, in true Mexican style, from the fetishes and phobias of European and North American liberalism: the will to riches, freedom, order, democracy and science, and an end to tradition. It also featured a pair of purely national dogmas. One, formulated by Miguel Lerdo in 1856, held that: “Mexico’s soil is some of the most fertile in the world.” The other, in the words of don José María Vigil, maintained that “we Mexicans are unable to effectively exploit the physical and material gifts with which we have been blessed.” Behind our natural greatness we glimpse the work of Providence; in our human failings, the work of History. . . .

The Liberal vision was comprised of a half-dozen freedoms—economic, political, intellectual, religious, pedagogical, and the freedom to work. This version of laissez-faire advocated the suppression of Tyrants, substituting the noble tyranny of the Law; this, in turn, in order to keep itself equidistant