The turn of the 20th century in the United States brought a change of identity to the suddenly powerful nation. With new demonstrations of international dominance like Theodore Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet, the beginnings of a cultural revolution led by “new money”, and the further development of American Imperialism, the nation’s leaders looked to continue the expansion of their nation. Finding the Western frontier settled, expansionists and other vested interests turned their eyes to the South of the United States’ border.

Separated from America by only the Rio Grande and desert, Mexico was also in transition; still healing from the vast tracts of land lost in the Mexican American War and coping with the end of Porfirio Diaz’s 35 year-long dictatorship, the political and social climate fostered the Mexican Revolution from 1910 through 1920. Mexico, unstable politically and economically, was an attractive addition to the United States’ list of nations where they could drape their stars and stripes. The United States wanted to intervene but needed to justify their actions as necessary to the Mexican people to avoid global criticism and to garner domestic support. Americans interested in investing or acquiescing Mexico, then, depicted its people as incapable of being a part of an operable Democracy, stressing that Mexicans were in dire need of foreign aid. American intervention into Mexico led to intense debate, with interventionists, ultimately, prevailing. By justifying American involvement by stating their superiority and accentuating the “flaws” of Mexico the U.S. successfully influenced Americans into thinking intervention was conscionable. Citing the lack of quality men in Mexican politics and the population as a whole, alcohol consumption, and attacking the “peon class” of Mexicans, enough Americans felt that intervention was justified.
“The Mexican Situation” or “Problem”¹ as many American businessmen, educators, and politicians called it, was a topic of great contention. When analyzing essays, letters, and political cartoons it is clear, however, that American society was torn. The two political cartoons below show this division;

To the left, a stoic Uncle Sam watches over an errant dog whose sombrero reads “Mexican Revolution” while European leaders stand behind a wall labeled “Monroe Doctrine”, urging for something to be done. Europe, kept at bay by the doctrine’s heavy-handed claims over all of the Western Hemisphere, seems helpless in this cartoon. Europeans’ distance from the revolution, depicted as an animal and not a human like the other nations, shows the ultimate control the United States had over Mexico. Those who felt it was America’s job alone to cage the delinquent Mexican canine would have disagreed with the sentiments of the artist who drew the cartoon on the right. Here a feminized

³ Ibid
Mexico is entangled by the coils of a snake writhing in pain from the boot of a man, labeled “U.S.” Clutching the ground, attempting to escape the United States’ involvement, Mexico is certainly portrayed differently than on the left. Comparing these two political cartoons it is easy to see the difference of opinion between the artists. It was not just these two cartoonists who disagreed on the northern power’s role in Mexican affairs, but the American public as well.

Anti-interventionist Americans believed that it was not the place of the U.S. government to meddle in Mexican affairs and that any military presence would only hinder the current conditions in Mexico. Enoch F. Bell, the Associate Secretary of the American Board for Foreign Missions, was one such spokesperson. A reverend of the first, and one of the largest, American Christian missionary organizations, Bell’s words were distributed amongst the entire board and their readership. Attempting to sway the American public away from intervention Bell stated, “Mexico’s needs cannot be met by force or intervention. Nor can her fundamental problems be solved by foreign swords. Not even if we [the U.S.] went with the purest altruistic purpose possible.” Mr. H. Walker, a businessman in Mexico, agreed with Mr. Bell. In a letter, dated 1913, to Nebraskan Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, he wrote, “we in Mexico are…opposed to intervention…we object…because we have been well treated here, and we object to the destructions of an interesting if turbulent nationality, because until the real reason comes it [intervention] isn’t justified.” Both Bell and Walker made it clear that they felt that intervention was not an advisable course of action but while they contended that America would only complicate matters, others disagreed strongly.

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While some voices pined for the American government to remain uninvolved, to most Americans intervention was a very popular idea. Those who supported U.S. involvement in Mexican affairs listed Mexico’s instability, the danger the revolutionaries posed to Americans, the jeopardy of American investments, and the perceived inferiority of the Mexican people all as points to support, what they felt, was an inevitable intervention. From letters to the government, publications in scholarly journals, or correspondences from one friend to another, some Americans were very passionate on the matter. John Wyeth M.D., a successful businessman, doctor, and founder of the pharmaceutical company Wyeth (purchased by Pfizer in 2009 for $68 billion), felt strongly that the United States was meant to influence Mexico. Wyeth had money and social power, making his opinion important. His statements, then, such as, “there can be no solution of this serious problem except by intervention” or “our national destiny is impelling us to the occupation of Mexico,” not only had an audience, but an audience with money and the power to influence American policy.

Dr. Wyeth’s sentiment displayed the depth of which intervention seemed to be rooted in some American’s minds; so deeply in fact, that they felt it was their “destiny”. In 1912, American Consul Member Marion Letcher reflected the absolute certainty of the American imperialist when he remarked, “among Americans and other foreigners here [Mexico] there is but one opinion, and that is, the sooner or later intervention of the United States must come.” Some Americans were so sure about intervention that they looked to the complete and total conquest of Mexico. The Superintendent of the Refugio Gold and Silver Mine in Zacatecas, Mexico is one such extremist. In a letter to a Mr. H. Swain, the

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Superintendent plotted the quantity of firearms, number of men, time of morning to strike, which “zones” are “organized”, and what areas would be best to “take” first in hopes that America could annex all of Mexico.  

The general feeling of superiority Americans had over Mexicans generated polarized reactions. During the time of the Mexican Revolution there were Mexican appeals to the U.S., their “big brother”, for “sympathy.” And on the other hand, some Mexicans, like President Fransisco León de la Barra, refused to associate himself or the Mexican government, with “Washington [D.C.], because it might be construed as belligerency.” Mexicans also maintained conflicting opinions in regards to the intervention as well, with either party supporting or declining American involvement. This complex relationship between the two nations and their different factions turned the conflict into "a war of national liberation against the United States" rather than a revolution solely between Mexicans, further complicating the already delicate situation in Mexico at the time.

Amidst the debate and despite opposition, the U.S. crossed over their conterminous border with Mexico on two separate occasions. Twice the American government felt that they had the grounds to enter into Mexico with a military force and act as they pleased without any formal declaration of war or alliance. But their intervention did not present itself without justifications; Americans rationalized their actions by proving Mexico’s inferiority in comparison to the United States. Analyzing correspondences between American businessmen, politicians, and intellects on the matter of the Mexican Revolution,

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The Mexican Problem

American superiority is a dominant theme. Their documents are wrought with a plethora of slights against the Mexican character, culture, and race. Americans attacked any and every element of Mexican lifestyle and further solidified the validity of American intervention on the basis of the desperate nature of Mexico.

From these many criticisms multiple themes emerged, one of the more interesting ones being in regards to gender, with Americans demeaning the masculinity of Mexico’s men. Criticism toward the males of Mexico came in different forms ranging from direct to subtle and from the huddled masses to the leaders. Either way, Americans found issue with the perceived ineptitude of Mexican politicians, the current conditions in Mexico that suppressed the few leaders that were there, and the lack of character of all Mexican men in general. American’s arguments were so infectious that they even influenced Mexican leaders to think the same.

The first and most prominent issue that Americans either created or embellished was in regards to Mexican men’s supposed lack of leadership abilities and poor moral character. At this time in America, men were supposed to be in control, powerful, wealthy, and independent. Americans judged Mexicans on criteria that were equally as unrealistic in the United States as in Mexico. American “gentlemen” insulted Mexican men for not possessing the traits of the “ideal” American, imposing American cultural norms and social understandings on an entire nation of men that lived by different rules. An American Consulate member from Chihuahua shows this discrepancy between the understanding of what a man “should” be versus what he observes in his report from 1913, noting the “melancholy failure on the part of the…party to find suitable and efficient men for public office” and finding “the men called to the public service” are without “any particular aptitude or fitness.”

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The Mexican Problem

(mentioned earlier) agrees with the Consulate, stating that “to solve the Mexican problem…Mexico needs men [emphasis not added]-men with strong minds…men whom the spoils of office cannot buy…men who have honor…tall men.”\(^{15}\) The economist Henry Clews, PhD, echoed Bell’s and the Consulate’s sentiment as well, stating, “above all, Mexico needs men – strong men of high and unselfish purpose, men of great executive ability.”\(^{16}\) Clews, Bell, and the Consulate made it very apparent that they felt that the political and governing shortcomings of Mexico resulted from the absence of any capable men.

While some Americans blamed Mexican’s troubles on an absence of manly leaders others blamed the current system in Mexico for making it hard to be a man (still ultimately making it a gendered problem). For example, in 1912, American Consul Member Mr. M. Fletcher praised the “bright and capable men who plotted the revolution” but that they were unfortunately “deterred by caution or cowardice…hav[ing] not been able to lend…anything of dignity or respectability.”\(^{17}\) Mr. Fletcher artfully acknowledged the capability and intelligence of the leaders in Mexico while simultaneously painting them in a negative light by referring to their “cowardice” and their lack of “dignity”. In an anonymous letter to General Wood of the U.S. Army a concerned American also showed that there are competent men in Mexico, they just have a hard time overcoming the current conditions – “all the strongest and most reputable men of the country [Mexico] are put into silence or exile.”\(^{18}\) He said, “only a great man, or a combination of irresistible circumstances, could possibly hope for success under such conditions.”\(^{19}\)

\(^{15}\) Enoch Bell, "Intervention and the Mexican Problem." *Journal of International Relations* 10.2 (1919): Print. 147.


\(^{19}\) Ibid. Pg. 29.
author of the letter does not feel that there are no men for Mexican politics, just that the conditions are so grave that it would be hard for anyone to overcome. Ultimately, whether or not these Americans felt that Mexico was without men, or the few men they had were suppressed by the circumstances, they insisted that that Mexico’s fate lay in the hands of the men.

It was not just Mexican political men who were flawed, according to Americans, but all of them, in all classes, and public spheres. Beginning with the subtleties, some Americans showed their disrespect for Mexican men and leaders of the Revolution by referring to them as “boys” or “children”. For example, Cambridge University professor, James Hurst, analyzes the Villista prisoners and the court trials surrounding the event, and how American judges and lawyers refer to the testifying Mexican men as “boys” and, in contrast, the Anglo adults as “men.” Others were more blatant, such as the previously mentioned Superintendent of the Refugio Mine, who warned U.S. diplomats of the “class of men you would have to deal with” in Central Mexico, referring to the illiterate and uncivilized rebels. Americans wrote off all men for being beneath them, despite their class or status in society. Even President Huerta was subject to the condescending tone of the American, being called a “boy” by Nevadan Senator Francis Newlands.

Mexican men of all types were subject to disrespect from Americans. It is fascinating that these American depictions of men in Mexico were also adopted by some Mexicans themselves. Mexicans, like Americans, attacked both the integrity of their own nation’s men as well as the situation in Mexico. Governor of Coahuila, Miguel Cardenas, attested that the weaknesses of the government resulted from

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the lack of “thinking and substantial men of the country” blaming the nation’s misfortunes on men without any worth. And Colonel Enrique Portillo in his *Manifesto to the Mexican Nation* of 1912 said it is not Mexico that is man-less, but in order to rise above and “restore” Mexico from its “shattered” conditions, “she [Mexico] needs an absolutely immaculate man.” Both Mexicans and Americans felt that the nation was absent of pure men and found a scapegoat in an entire gender, rather than a few individuals.

Americans made it clear that they found issue with the men in Mexico for their lack of integrity and capability to run a nation. It was not just the character of these men that the Americans attacked but also their alcohol consumption. American critics swayed the feelings of the American public effectively by highlighting excessive drinking, and using the momentum from the Temperance movement in the United States that was occurring concurrently with the Mexican Revolution. Similarly with Americans’ generalized critiques of the entire population of men in Mexico, they were equally as broad with their accusations of Mexican alcohol consumption.

Americans showed their ability to adopt offensive stereotypes based on little to no facts during their campaign for intervention. The following political cartoon shows not only the depiction of the generalized rowdy and drunken Mexican, but how accepted U.S.’ imperialism became amongst the American public;

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While the other nations (all of which had been victim to American intervention to some degree at the time of the cartoon’s publication) are shown with good posture, nice clothes, and reading studiously, Mexico is drawn disheveled, drinking, and firing his pistol in the air. Next to the tame Philippines, Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua, Mexico is the only unruly student that Uncle Sam cannot control. This cartoon shows the arrogance of Americans – comfortable with the fact that Uncle Sam is teaching other nations the way of an American and appalled that the Mexican pupil will not conform. This political cartoon’s depiction of the Mexican people as drunk and disorderly was not atypical. The Superintendent of the Refugio Mine reflects the same generalizations of Mexicans when he writes about them as “devils”, that are “simply animals” that “drink hard.” He continues,

They are bad enough sober, but it is nothing compared to when they get drunk. They all carry knives or machetes. About 99% of them get drunk whenever there is an opportunity. I never met a Mexican that wouldn’t get drunk.26

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The Superintendent is comfortable making sweeping generalizations about Mexicans, convinced of their unruly behavior and affinity toward alcohol. With Americans believing that Mexico was comprised of boozehounds they began to question their own safety as well as the safety of the American families residing in Mexico, feeling surrounded by irrational and drunk Mexicans. The complaints of the American populace in Mexico referred to the banditry and irrationality of the revolutionaries. Within these complaints alcohol consumption was a recurring theme that sometimes stole all the credit for Mexican’s poor behavior and other times is just one of the many contributing factors to American’s unease.

In a letter addressed to the Secretary of State postmarked from Tampico, Mexico from 1913 the author wrote that Mexico is unsafe because of the “trains [that] are frequently robbed” and how “Americans are threatened…and visited repeatedly [by the revolutionaries].”\(^27\) This American tied the lack of safety with alcohol – “women have had to be brought in from the camps and sent to the United States as it is impossible to know what these bandits or alleged revolutionists will do when they become drunk.”\(^28\) This particular man cited the rebels’ inebriation as what made them dangerous. R. E. Young, an American citizen and Chief Clerk of the Mazapil Copper Company, reporting on a revolutionary raid of his place of employment, also referred to the dangers of the rebels while under the influence of alcohol. He recounted, “that none of the foreign employees fired on the Rebels, or made any resistance, in any matter what-so-ever.” However, despite his employees’ peaceful behavior, the rebels, “those of who…appeared to be intoxicated and completely beyond control…opened fire on the small group of defenseless foreigners.”\(^29\)


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

This train of thought is not one of antiquity; currently, people still remark on the consumption of intoxicating beverages during the Mexican Revolution in a similar manner. In the first volume of *Mexico and the United States*, published in 2003, a contributor writes, “one explanation for the fighting between Mexicans was…alcohol consumption.” Americans, then and now, felt that alcohol played a large role in Mexican’s behavior, violence, and danger.

Just as with gender, Americans did not solely target the drinking habits of the greater population of the Mexican Revolution, but the leaders as well. The American Consulate, for example, wrote off “drunken Salazar” due to his “dependence” on alcohol. William Bayard Hale, a journalist, described President Huerta as "an ape-like old man" who "may almost be said to subsist on alcohol." In an unsigned letter addressed to Com. Bayard Hale entitled “U.S. Naval Officer’s View of the Revolution” the officer also stated that “Huerta had been considered in disfavor and was…an habitual drunkard.” Americans had a fundamental problem with these leaders for a multitude of reasons but oftentimes highlighted their alcohol consumption.

American public’s split stance on intervention into Mexico was not separate enough, with one viewpoint conquering American decision making. Americans emphasized the absence of men in Mexican politics and the nation as a whole and the widespread alcohol consumption of Mexicans as major contributors to Mexico’s predicament. It being almost 100 years after the Mexican Revolution, America can look to its problems with immigration and draw parallels between the two events.

American intervention occurs often, to this day, into other nations that seem weaker than the U.S. and dependent on foreign aid. Revealing the falsehood of allegations by Americans to Mexicans during the Revolution shows similar fallacies in today’s logic. Learning from the mistakes of the past the American people can avoid not only hardship of their own but imposing it on others.
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