

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 Ulúa 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.*