

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 55

“So Far From God”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1908, the President of Mexico, Porfirio Díaz, gave an interview to an American reporter. In this interview, he made two statements that attracted a lot of attention.

First, the 78-year old announced he would not run in the 1910 Mexican presidential election, which was quite a shocker. Mexico, he said, was ready to move on, and was ready for a democratically elected President. If he meant it, it would mean that Porfirio Díaz would not be on the ballot in a Mexican presidential election for the first time in thirty years. If he meant it.

Second, he offered a lament for his home country, one that was often repeated and remains so to this day. “Poor Mexico,” said the President, “So far from God; so close to the United States.”

Welcome to the History of the Twentieth Century.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 55. So Far From God.

Human beings have lived in Mexico since about 11,000 BC. Civilization arose in Mexico independently in about 1500 BC. Over the next 3,000 years, five civilizations would rise and fall in Mexico: The Olmec, the Maya, the Teotihuacán, the Toltec, and the Aztec.

The Aztecs were an alliance of three city states, Texcoco and Tlacopan, both located on the shores of Lake Texcoco in central Mexico, and Tenochtitlan, a city built on an island in the same lake. At the height of their power, these three cities, with a combined population of about 350,000 ruled over a collection of tributary states with a population totaling some twelve million.

Each of the three cities had a leader called the “speaker.” In time, Tenochtitlan became the largest and most powerful of the three cities, and its speaker came to be called the “elder speaker.” Europeans would later call this arrangement the “Aztec Empire” and refer to the elder speaker as the “Emperor,” although this language is misleading, since we are talking more about a much looser political arrangement than what we usually think of when we hear the word “Empire.” And because it was a loose, tributary arrangement, a relatively small group of Spanish

conquerors under the command of Hernán Cortés was able to bring down Aztec rule by enlisting the support of the people paying the tributes. And with an assist from the smallpox virus, which they unwittingly brought along.

The Spanish conquerors tortured and killed the speakers of the three cities, leveled Tenochtitlan and forbade natives from settling there. They outlawed human sacrifice, which was central to the native religion, and imported friars from Spain to convert the natives to Catholicism. The Spanish essentially replaced the Aztecs as the ruling class in Mexico, and seized control for themselves. The combination of a political arrangement already in place that the Spanish could take control of to harness the labor of the natives plus great mineral wealth, principally in the form of silver, made this territory, now called New Spain, an economic boon for Old Spain. A viceroy was appointed to rule New Spain in the name of the King of Spain, and the Spanish rebuilt Tenochtitlan, now called Mexico City, and it became the capital of the colony.

The Spanish King and government ruled New Spain through the Viceroy at Mexico City for a period of about 300 years. A movement toward independence from Spain began in 1810, after the French invasion of Spain, with a creole priest named Miguel Hidalgo, who called upon his flock to revolt. Hidalgo's movement came close to capturing Mexico City, but was defeated, and Father Miguel was executed in 1811. But a low-grade insurgency against Spanish rule continued for the next ten years.

In September, 1821, the Mexican Empire declared its independence from Spain, although this was a very conservative revolution, led by the Spanish peninsular and creole elites. The Mexican Congress offered the throne of the Mexican Empire to the King of Spain, Ferdinand VII, the idea being that the Empire would be a separate state, but in a personal union with the King of Spain as its Emperor.

Ferdinand refused, and after a brief war of independence, Mexico was victorious. The first and only Emperor was Augustín de Iturbide, the victorious general of the independence war. Technically, his title was Constitutional Emperor, as the Empire was meant to be a constitutional monarchy, controlling all the former Spanish holdings in North America. That would be from as far north as what are today the US states that run from California to Texas, to as far south as what is now Costa Rica.

The United States quickly recognized the new Mexican Empire and made inquiries about purchasing its northern territories. The US was rebuffed. Spain made several attempts over the next ten years to retake Mexico, all of which failed, although most European countries supported Spain and, unlike the United States, declined to recognize Mexican independence.

Political infighting led to the Emperor seizing power and closing down the Congress. He crowned himself Emperor in a lavish ceremony modeled on Napoleon's, and began to rule as an absolute monarch. This rule lasted mere months before liberals who supported a constitutional republic rallied around an army commander at Veracruz, Mexico's key port and gateway to the

rest of the world. This commander was General Antonio López de Santa Anna, an officer who had distinguished himself during the war of independence and had built a power base for himself afterward in Veracruz, and his turning against his former patron was a crucial moment in the fall of the Empire and the establishment of Mexico as a federal constitutional republic, modeled on the United States. The Central American states revolted against Mexican rule entirely and declared themselves independent.

The next fifty years of Mexican history were turbulent, with the presidency of the country changing hands over seventy times. Santa Anna himself accounts for eleven non-consecutive presidencies, and was the most important political figure in the country during this time, whether he was President or not. During this period, Mexican politics continued to be a struggle, often violent, between conservative traditionalists who liked pretty much everything about Spanish rule except, you know, the Spanish, and liberals who wanted to see Mexico become a modern liberal constitutional republic.

In 1835, Santa Anna had the Mexican constitution revamped in an effort to move the country away from federalism and toward a centralized Republic like Republican France. This move was unpopular in many Mexican states, most notably Yucatán in the far south and Texas in the far north. Both of these states declared independence from Mexico, although Yucatán would later peacefully return to the fold.

The rebellion in Texas was different. It was largely led by immigrant settlers from the United States. As part of their immigration, these settlers had pledged to embrace Mexican citizenship, convert to Catholicism, and accept Mexico's ban on slavery. The American settlers took these pledges with their fingers crossed behind their backs, so they totally didn't count, but Mexican authorities had trouble understanding that. At first, the local Mexican authorities didn't see much point in cracking down on the immigrants, and the Americans were pretty much given free rein to do as they pleased, until Santa Anna's constitutional reforms led to a confrontation. The Texas rebels were able to defeat the Mexican army, capture Santa Anna himself, and thereby win independence. Texas would later be annexed by the United States, which would then declare war on Mexico itself in 1846, in a dispute over where exactly the southern border of Texas lay. In 1848, after American troops occupied Veracruz and marched into Mexico City, Mexico would agree to cede large portions of its northern territories to the United States.

In 1853, President Santa Anna would agree to sell a small additional strip of Mexican territory to the United States, the so-called Gadsden Purchase, which was deeply unpopular among the Mexican people, who felt that the United States had gotten plenty of Mexican territory already, thank you very much. Santa Anna was overthrown for good in 1855, and in 1857 a new constitution was ratified. The Constitution of 1857 was much more liberal than anything that had come before it. It retained the federal character of the Mexican government, but it guaranteed freedom of religion, universal suffrage, and curbed the privileges of the Catholic Church, for which it was denounced by Pope Pius IX, the Catholic bishops of Mexico, and the conservative

elites, which led to a three-year civil war. The war ended with a Liberal victory, winding down just about the same time the Civil War in the United States was winding up. A Liberal, Benito Juárez, was elected President in 1861, although there was still much dissent among conservative pro-Catholic Church elements of Mexican society.

This conflict left Mexico deeply in debt and she was having trouble paying her bills. As we have already seen, in those days European powers could and did use military force to compel debt payments from smaller countries. Most of this money was owed to France, Britain, and Spain, and they agreed to joint military action against Mexico. In December, 1861, European forces invaded, again occupying Mexico's major port city, Veracruz, and seizing control of the customs house.

But by April 1862, four months into the occupation, it was becoming clear that the French government under Napoleon III had larger ambitions in Mexico than simply debt collection. They were out to take control of the country and install a new government: a conservative, pro-Catholic Church, pro-French monarchy. Spain and Britain decided this wasn't what they had signed up for and withdrew from the coalition, but French troops pressed on, occupying larger and larger areas of Mexico. A French attempt to capture the city of Puebla was repulsed on May 5, 1862, hence the holiday Cinco de Mayo, celebrated every May fifth by North Americans looking for an excuse to drink tequila. The hero of the battle was a Mexican *mestizo* general named Porfirio Díaz.

But the French would try again the following year, this time advancing all the way to Mexico City by June 1863, which is just about the same time as the Siege of Vicksburg and Lee's second invasion of the North in the US Civil War. Mexico was declared a Catholic Empire on July 10, with the support of conservative Catholic monarchists.

But President Juárez and his cabinet and government were able to withdraw in good order to the city of Chihuahua in the northwest, where they would continue to function as the Republican government in exile and waged guerilla warfare against the French-installed Empire. As we have already discussed in *The History of the Twentieth Century*, the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef's younger brother Maximilian was invited to come to Mexico and reign as the Emperor.

The government of the United States was vocal in its criticism of a foreign power overthrowing a neighboring republic and installing a monarchy, and the United States would not recognize the Empire, but with its own civil war raging, there were few concrete steps Washington could take.

But the Republic fought on, even as French troops supporting the Empire advanced and consolidated control over ever larger portions of the country. In February 1865, the French took control of Oaxaca, a southern city defended by Porfirio Díaz. But by this time, the US Civil War was winding down, and the American government began lending stockpiles of rifles and ammunition it no longer needed to the Juárez government, and Washington began to drop broad hints that it might send US soldiers into the fight. This was enough to persuade Napoleon III to

withdraw his French soldiers by the spring of 1866, and without the support of foreign troops, the Imperial government collapsed in short order. Emperor Maximilian was executed by firing squad, and the Republic under Juárez was restored.

Conservative forces in Mexico had been widely discredited by the whole, you know, collaborating with a foreign invader against the legally elected government of your own country thing, and Juárez and his Liberals could pretty much do as they pleased. During the war, the Mexican Congress had granted an emergency extension of Juárez's presidency, and in 1867 he won a proper election, but in 1871, he won re-election to yet another term, against the almost-as-popular, now retired, General Porfirio Díaz. This happened in spite of a constitutional prohibition on the re-election of an incumbent President and amid accusations of electoral fraud. Díaz tried to organize a revolt against Juárez's rule, but Juárez rendered the issue moot by dying just a few months later. Juárez's vice president, Sebastian Lerdo, assumed the presidency per the constitution, and depriving Díaz of his best issue. But in 1876, Lerdo, too, was re-elected, again in spite of the constitutional prohibition against the re-election of an incumbent. Díaz was ready with another revolt and was able to assume the presidency himself before the year was out.

Díaz made a big deal about how he was not going to seek re-election, unlike his two shameless, constitution-violating predecessors, and he stepped down in 1880, in favor of his handpicked successor, Manuel González. But Díaz remained the real power in the country, and in the next presidential election, in 1884, he stepped right back up again, since the constitution did *not* prohibit *non-consecutive* presidential terms, and he was re-elected. Apparently, Díaz was unwilling to go through all that again, so he had the constitution amended to permit him to run for re-election in the future. He would continue to be President of Mexico for the rest of the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth.

[music: "El Pájaro Carpintero"]

At the time Díaz assumed the Mexican presidency, the nation's economy was in dismal condition. Mexico had once been the crown jewel of the Spanish Empire, now, after fifty years of this political instability, it was a backward and impoverished land. The Mexican per capita national income was lower in 1876 than it had been on the day independence had been declared.

Northern Mexico was a sparsely inhabited desert at this time. Many of those who did live there were Native Americans who did not recognize Mexican, or US, authority, like Geronimo, whom we have already met. Some of them, like Geronimo, took advantage of the border to move back and forth, raiding in one country and then fleeing to the other, which was a source of tension between the two nations, as the US often complained Mexico wasn't doing enough to police its border regions.

The period in which Díaz ruled Mexico is sometimes referred to by Mexicans as El Porfiriato, The Porfiriato. It is hard to give a thumbnail summary of his rule. He ruled with a heavy hand, but he could be generous to his supporters, even to former opponents, hence the phrase *pan o*

palo, “bread or the stick,” which is used to summarize his style of rule. He clamped down on dissidents, indigenous peoples, and rural banditry, and encouraged foreign investment to develop the Mexican economy. This foreign investment came mostly from the USA, as you might imagine.

Back when Juárez had been president, the idea of building a rail line linking Mexico to the United States had first been raised. Juárez had opposed the project, expressing the view that it was a good thing for Mexico to be separated from the US by a wide desert. Under Díaz, the project was built. The cost of shipping exports to the United States dropped by 95%, and trade between the two countries boomed. The population grew, especially in the cities and in the border regions. During the Porfiriato, Mexico City’s population for the first time exceeded what it was estimated to have been back when it was Aztec and called Tenochtitlan.

American capital flowed into Mexico, encouraged by special tax breaks. Billions of US dollars were invested in Mexico during the Porfiriato, although many criticized Díaz for allowing American businesses so much opportunity for so little benefit to Mexico. The rail line and the investment led to development along the US border, and a growing network of rail connections in the interior of the country that helped bind Mexico together, but the benefits of foreign trade and investment flowed principally to the foreigners and to Mexicans who were already wealthy: the creoles, Mexicans of Spanish ancestry. The native Mexicans and the *mestizos* remained poor, became increasingly resentful, and bore the brunt of Díaz’s increasingly brutal rule

Díaz, now in his seventies, still ruled Mexico in the early years of the twentieth century. But the global rise of nationalism was affecting Mexico, too. Mexicans became increasingly unhappy with the wealth of the country primarily benefiting foreigners. Where is our prosperity? Then came the Panic of 1907, which hit the Mexican economy hard, supposedly Díaz’s strong point.

In 1908, he gave the interview I described at the top of the episode, suggesting he was not going to run again, and was content to allow the democratic process to select a successor without his input. In fact, he didn’t mean a word of it. So why did he say it? Apparently to please the American audience. It’s quite possible the now 78-year old Díaz didn’t understand the new century well enough to appreciate that his words were not going to stay in the pages of a North American magazine; they would echo back into Mexico, heralding the beginning of the end of his regime.

Mexican political figures of every stripe took Díaz at his word and began jockeying for a shot at replacing him. Díaz need to do something to show that he was still in charge, and in 1909, he invited the newly elected President of the United States, William Howard Taft, to an historic summit meeting, which was as much about reasserting himself as it was about Mexican relations with the US. The morning session was held in El Paso, in the United States, and then after lunch, the two presidents adjourned to Ciudad Juárez, across the border in Mexico. This was the first face-to-face meeting of its kind, and when Taft crossed the border, it was only the second time

that a sitting US President had left the country, the first time being, as you may recall from episode 43, Theodore Roosevelt's inspection tour of the Panama Canal project just a year earlier.

Having suitably reasserted himself, Díaz set to work hobbling his political opposition by his usual bread or clubs methods, hiring them to work for him or threatening them and their interests if they opposed him. Mexico celebrated 1910 as the hundredth anniversary of independence, and Díaz ran for re-election confident that he would either be unopposed, or, at worst, opposed by some eccentric political lightweight. Well, it was the second thing, and the name of the eccentric political lightweight was Francisco Madero.

Francisco Madero was born in 1873, making him just 36 years old when he ran for president. Not old enough, in fact, to be able to remember a time when Mexico had a president not named Porfirio Díaz. He was the eldest son of a father with the same name, and a member of one of the richest families in Mexico. He was a lightweight in the literal sense of being short and slender, the result of a sickly childhood, as well as in the political sense of having little prior experience in government and politics. He was educated in Paris and at UC Berkeley, where he also developed an interest in the spirit world. This is a topic we have not touched upon in this podcast, but there was quite a fad for such things at the turn of the twentieth century, and Madero came to believe that he was in communication with people from beyond the grave.

He returned to Mexico and managed the family estate, where he put his foreign education to good use, upgrading and modernizing the family businesses, and making them all even richer. He developed a reputation as a good employer, too, paying good wages and offering free health care to his workers, and he gave generously to charity. He married at the age of 29 in 1903, but he and his wife would have no children. He maintained his spiritual beliefs, and came to believe that he was in communication with his little brother, Raúl. (Raúl had died at the age of four.) Francisco would attribute his concern for the poor and the dispossessed to Raúl, who was, he claimed, pushing him to help the needy. Raúl had also badgered Francisco into giving up drinking and smoking, and becoming a vegetarian.

Concern for the poor and the dispossessed was laudable, but it also increasingly led to conflict with the authoritarian regime of Porfirio Díaz. Raúl began to tell Francisco to get more involved in politics, as a Díaz opponent.

When Díaz gave that 1908 interview, it inspired Francisco to write and publish a book about the coming election of 1910 and what it meant for the future of Mexico. He argued that the Porfirate had gone on for too long, and was holding Mexico back, and he pointed out the irony that Díaz had come to power as an opponent of his predecessors' re-elections, then had run for re-election himself over and over again. The book was a best seller, and Francisco embarked on a speaking tour to spread the message. He began selling off his business interests to fund anti-Díaz political organizations.

So when 1910 rolled around and Díaz did in fact run for re-election, as well as putting the squeeze on the people he regarded as his most dangerous potential opponents, it was left to Francisco Madero to run against him. Now, you can probably understand why Díaz preferred to run against the young neophyte who was getting his political views from beyond the grave. But the fact remained that Madero was rich, energetic, committed, and now was well known. So, just to be on the safe side, during the political campaign Díaz had Madero arrested and imprisoned, along with thousands of his supporters. Díaz opponents had to scramble to find a new candidate in the middle of the campaign, and Díaz was, unsurprisingly, re-elected.

Meanwhile, the Madero family had to post a bond to get Francisco released from prison, and he promptly fled to the United States, where in November 1910, he published a statement declaring the election a fraud and calling for armed revolution to overthrow Díaz and restore a democratic government.

Many people across Mexico answered his call. They were diverse groups, with different grievances, rebelling for different reasons. There were wealthy creoles who had lost Díaz's favor. There were liberal creoles, like Madero himself, who wanted to see democracy and constitutionalism. There were skilled workers who resented that the best jobs went to foreigners. And there were the poor, the dispossessed, the native and *mestizo* peoples who had suffered under appalling poverty, with an 80% infant mortality rate, and who often were left homeless and dispossessed as their lands were seized and handed over to Mexico's system of huge haciendas owned by wealthy creoles. As a result, these poor Mexicans were, to paraphrase David Lloyd George, made trespassers on land where their ancestors had dwelled for centuries before any Spaniard had so much as laid eyes on it.

Díaz fought back, mobilizing the army and police to crush the rebellions. In most places, they succeeded. But not in the state of Chihuahua, where there were particularly strong resentments against a wealthy landowning family there that was closely allied with Díaz. There a 20-something small businessman named Pascual Orozco, assisted by a bandit and cattle rustler named Pancho Villa, organized a rebel force that in January 1911 was able to defeat the federal soldiers sent against them. The defiant Orozco ordered his troops to strip the uniforms off the dead bodies of the federal troops and ship them back to Porfirio Díaz with the taunting message, "Here are the wrappers, send me more tamales."

In February, Madero crossed the border into Chihuahua to join forces with Orozco and Villa. Their successes sparked further uprisings across the country, including that of Emiliano Zapata, a *mestizo* from the state of Morelos.

Zapata was an ambitious young man who rose from humble beginnings to become a respected member of his village. During the Porfirate, when peasant lands in Morelos were being seized and handed over to wealthy hacienda owners, Zapata, at that time still a teenager, was part of a delegation from his community that was granted an audience with Díaz to bring their grievances

to the President in person. Díaz had dealt with their petition by imprisoning the older men of the delegation, and conscripting the younger ones, including Zapata, into the army, which was a common practice for dealing with dissenters at the time.

Zapata served out his term in the army and returned to his community. He was made head of his village council at the remarkably young age of thirty, in 1909. When Francisco Madero put out his call for revolution, Zapata had answered by assembling the peasants of Morelos into a revolutionary force called the Liberation Army of the South, with promises of reversal of the land grabs of the Porfiriato, and, more generally, redistribution of land from the haciendas to the peasants, and they marched on Mexico City from the south.

By May, 1911, the northern rebels had taken Ciudad Juárez, the site of Díaz's triumphant summit meeting with US President William Howard Taft just 19 months earlier. Madero designated the city the provisional capital and named a cabinet.

The uprisings continued. Soldiers began to defect to the rebel side. Demonstrators marched against Díaz in Mexico City itself. And an unhappy Taft administration, concerned about the threat to America's large investments in Mexico, pressed Díaz to resign. He did so before the month was out, in favor of an interim presidency, to be followed in six months by another election, in October 1911, which Madero won this one easily. He marched into Mexico City in triumph, and Díaz went into exile in Paris, remarking as he left that "Madero has unleashed a tiger. Let us see if he can control it."

Yeah. This is one of those stories where I wish I could stop right here, but unfortunately, this is not the end of the revolution; it is barely the beginning. Mexico will be wracked by revolutionary violence for years to come. The problem was that Madero was a classical liberal. He was looking for free and fair elections and the rule of law, so as far as he was concerned, once Díaz was gone and he was in power, the revolution was over, and it was time for all those peasant soldiers to lay down their arms and go back to working on the haciendas. But to people like Orozco and Villa, the ones who had, you know, actually put their lives on the line to get rid of Díaz while Madero was living in the United States, to them, the revolution was also about social and economic justice. It was about an end to the stranglehold that wealthy landowning creoles had on the nation.

Madero, a wealthy, landowning creole himself, couldn't see the problem. The constitution and laws of Mexico were being followed, and that was what mattered. But it wasn't enough for men like Orozco or Villa or Zapata. They were looking for social justice, and in many cases, had promised their soldiers that after Díaz was gone, their lives would change for the better. Now they were being told to disband. When Madero declared that what Mexico needed was liberty, and not bread, he just sounded clueless, and some of the revolutionaries carried on resistance against the new government, including Orozco. President Madero turned to a general named Victoriano Huerta, who had come out of retirement to defend the new constitutional government.

You can recognize in this political situation in Mexico in 1912 the same pattern we have seen in Europe and the United States: increasing poverty among the poorest citizens, even as the nation as a whole becomes more economically and technologically advanced, and as the old 19th century debate between conservatives and liberals drones on, with neither side offering a solution to the growing problems.

But in the end, it would not be the revolutionaries, the Villas and Zapatas, who brought about Madero's downfall. The wealthy conservative elites who had prospered under Diaz and then been left out in the cold by Madero also raised forces against him. At first, Madero and General Huerta were able to put down these rebellions, and their leaders were arrested. But Madero was no Díaz. His enemies were treated with civility, confined to a civilian prison in Mexico City. Unfortunately for Madero, this prison gave these wealthy men the opportunity to meet, plan a coup, bribe the guards, and summon their forces to the capital, where they were sprung from prison on February 9, 1913, and attacked the Presidential Palace. This led to what Mexicans call "the ten tragic days," of heavy fighting in the capital.

The United States ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson, stepped up at once and became involved in negotiations to end the fighting. Unfortunately, Wilson also seems to have taken it as a given that the fighting was Madero's fault, and the only solution was a change of government. Madero was asked to resign, but refused. The American ambassador, supported by the British, German, and Spanish embassies, met with both sides and brokered an armistice for Sunday, February 16, supposedly for the purpose of burying the dead and giving noncombatants an opportunity to leave the city. But Ambassador Wilson used the armistice to broker a deal between the conservative rebels and General Huerta, in which the general would switch sides in exchange for being made President of Mexico.

The deal was completed on Monday. On Tuesday, Madero was arrested. He was supposed to have been sent into exile, but was murdered instead. He was at this time 39 years old.

Victoriano Huerta, once Madero's general, was now the President. His rule would be brutal, but short, because *this* is the real start of the Mexican revolution. Out in the provinces, the armies of Villa and Zapata would resist this attempt to restore the Porfiriato, and violence would wrack Mexico for years to come. The story of the Mexican Revolution will draw in the United States, and in a strange way, intersect with the coming Great War in Europe. But that is a story for a future episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Next weekend is the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, so I will be taking the week off to spend time with my family, and, of course, work on scripts for future episodes. But I hope you will join me in two weeks' time, as we return to Great Britain, to continue the story of the ongoing British constitutional crisis, and how, in the midst of that crisis, the United Kingdom will lose its monarch, for the second time in the still-young century. That's in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should point out that the “ten tragic days” occurred in the final weeks of William Howard Taft’s administration in Washington. On March 4, 1913, a new President, Woodrow Wilson, would take office. While the Taft administration and Ambassador Wilson saw General Huerta as the man to bring stability to Mexico and protect US investment, President Wilson viewed him askance, if not with outright alarm. Ambassador Wilson, who had all but engineered a coup, would be recalled, and the new administration in Washington would refuse to recognize the Huerta government.

[music: Closing Theme]