

WOODROW WILSON
AND
THE INVASION OF VERACRUZ

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to prove that Woodrow Wilson's decision to invade Veracruz in 1914 was based on misguided, overly simplistic idealism rather than rational counsel and scholarly evaluation of events.

Important to this paper are the events leading to, and the subsequent invasion of Veracruz by American forces. Beginning with the death of Francisco Madero. This paper will give evidence that will clearly show that Woodrow Wilson based his decision to invade Veracruz on trifling matters, that in fact were nothing more than "mistakes."

This paper shall show that Woodrow Wilson's mediation with Victoriano Huerta was doomed to failure because of the insistence of Wilson that Huerta withdraw from the political scene. Most important in this paper is Wilson's counsel or lack of it and the problems which arise due to this deficiency in diplomatic communication during the "crisis" caused by the events at Tampico.

Crucial to the destiny of Mexico were the historical factors that made her vulnerable to the invasion of 1914. Mexico, from 1876 to 1910, was ruled by Porfirio Diaz, with the exception of a four year term from 1880-1884.¹ Although the Diaz government accomplished several municipal improvements his government was more known for its suppression of revolts. In the election of 1880 Diaz hand-picked his successor, whom he soon became dissatisfied with and therefore, Diaz ran again for the presidency and was elected in 1884.

The next twenty years under the Diaz government the governing of the state of Mexico was done so with order and power. Diaz consolidated the government into a tight central unit governed by him. In this consolidation of power, Diaz totally silenced the press and placed his friends in positions of authority.

Yet, when Diaz came to power the Mexican government was bankrupt. Diaz opened Mexican doors to foreign investors and companies. Diaz made the offers so appealing to the foreigners that it was the Mexican businesses and workers who suffered. The wealth which accumulated during the "foreign invasion" was kept in the hands of a few or otherwise went abroad. Yet, to the foreigners, Mexico looked like a very prosperous country and many foreign writers sang only praise for the Diaz government saying that "Diaz had turned Mexico into a powerful,

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law-abiding, industrial nation".² Due to the foreign investments, the distribution of wealth between the rich and poor, and the dictatorships of the past, Mexico was ripe for a social revolution.

In the presidential election of 1910, Diaz was opposed by Francisco I. Madero. Diaz, wanting to take no chances, had Madero arrested on the night of June 6 and confined until the ballots from the election had been counted.³ No one was surprised when Diaz was re-elected and Madero was exiled to the United States.⁴

It was from the States that Madero continued his struggle against President Diaz. Madero declared, in the Plan of San Luis Potosi, that all officials in the election of 1910, were invalid. Madero declared that the election was nothing but fraud. Not intentionally, Madero had become the leader of a large, somewhat undefined, system of revolutionary preparations.⁵ Yet, after seeing his hopes for a free election crushed, Madero turned reluctantly to armed rebellion.⁶ Madero himself made no claims of social or economic reform once he came to power, for he was a nineteenth-century liberal, who believed in a well-organized, limited, middle-class democracy.⁷ Revolution began on November 20, 1910, with Madero's consent.

Armed resistance grew at a rapid pace due to the fact that the leaders of the fighting themselves, read more into the Plan of San Luis Potosi than Madero had included. Madero's nature and upbringing would guide his plan of social or economic reform. Being of the landed class it would seem strange for Madero to call for sweeping economic reform.

It was stated that although the Revolution of 1910 originally had a political character and was concerned only with presidential succession, its eventual success was due to the discontent of the rural masses who were suffering from the unequal distribution of land.

As the success of the revolution spread, Diaz, who was now over eighty, fled Mexico to spend the rest of his life in exile in Europe.⁹

Madero was elected president after the downfall of the Diaz government. The election of Madero was the freest Mexico had seen and there was a spirit of optimism about the new government.¹⁰ It looked as though Madero would lead Mexico to social, economic, and political progress. Yet, as time went on, Madero proved himself incapable of dealing effectively with Mexico's problems. Most importantly, he failed to see the importance for great economic and social reform. As Madero failed to act, revolution began against him. As the rebellion increased in intensity, Madero called upon General Victoriano Huerta for protection. Huerta plotted with the opposition against Madero and then used

his troops to oust Madero from the presidency.¹¹ Madero and his vice-president were mysteriously shot to death "while trying to escape."¹² Thus Huerta assumed the presidential office and brought the return of a strong central government to Mexico.

Huerta's assumption of the presidential office did not end the revolution. Mexico in 1914 was a country in civil war. Thus, when Woodrow Wilson assumed the power and office of President of the United States he inherited a revolution on his southern border. Huerta was opposed by Venustiano Carranza, who favored some type of democratic government. Carranza's followers were known as Constitutionalists because they favored a constitutional form of government.

Economically, in 1914, Mexico was in debt. She had been involved in civil war for the last four years and had exhausted her cash supply. Socially, Mexico was a country with a large rift between the wealthy and the poor. "The gap between rich and poor widened, accelerated after 1904 by the adoption of the gold standard, but basically because of the nature of government."¹³ More than a quarter of the land surface of Mexico passed into the hands of not more than 834 men.¹⁴

On the international scene Mexico's debt problem caused some concern to her northern neighbor, the United States. The United States was worried that Mexico's inability to pay

her debts to her foreign investors might lead to an attempt by some government to try collecting her debt by means of armed enforcement. Yet, the Monroe Doctrine, promulgated by the United States kept the debt collectors away.

Wilson's coming to the presidential office in 1913 coincides very closely with that of Huerta in Mexico. President Wilson loathed the dictators who ruled in most of Latin America, in as much as he saw them to be monarchs whose form of government was outdated. Wilson saw the constant outbreaks of revolutions as suffocating to the new democracies. Wilson somehow reached the conclusion that the problems faced by the United States were also faced by Mexico. "Unaware of the divergent background of the peoples, he assumed that the outlook and attitudes of Mexicans were identical to those of Americans."¹⁵ Wilson also believed that if the United States replaced the ruling caudillo with a democratic government, that the people of Mexico would be eternally indebted. Wilson's thoughts were all good, yet unfounded, totally forgetting or ignoring nationalism. Wilson failed to see why the Mexican people could not see the advantages in democracy. It was simply because they had nothing to compare it to. The Mexicans had no basis for democracy in their history. A dictatorial rule was all they had known, so democracy to the Mexicans was a good idea, but they had nothing to base it on in their past.

It is clear that Wilson was displeased with what was going on in Mexico. At the same time, Wilson did not want any interference from European countries. Wilson also states his views on the participation of American citizens in the following letter in the fall of 1913:

We cannot refrain in response from expressing our grave concern at the plan disclosed. To encourage or even to countenance any interference in the internal affairs of an independent country with which we are at peace, when that plan plainly involves the possible use of armed force, would be a manifest violation of our sacred obligations to the entire world. We feel it to be our plain duty to see that no plans for controlling the politics or government of Mexico should emanate from or be guided, directed, or assisted from the United States or by any of its citizens. With every effort to bring peace and orderly government, with liberty to that distressed country every thoughtful American must of course sympathize, but (Americans) citizens of the United States are not at liberty to take any part in such efforts, either directly or indirectly, beyond the limits of the moral power of public opinion.

1. Can deal only with the facts as they are.
2. Must deal with them if possible without any use of armed force on our part.
3. The removal of Huerta by one process or another is inevitable and the only question remaining being how he will be eliminated.
4. The present object is to find a method by which the inevitable can be accomplished (peacefully) without further bloodshed. By the inevitable we mean the transfer of political power from Huerta to those who represent the interests and aspirations of the people.
5. To attempt to put a stop to the present processes of revolution before we have a peaceful method to suggest would be impracticable and futile because based upon no fixed program.
6. See notes. The use of force by the United States against the Carrancistas can be

justified only by the rejection (of definite) of terms (which they) of such a character (that they could not afford to reject them) that refusal on their part to accept them would be clearly indefensible (in the view of the whole world).¹⁶

Woodrow Wilson assumed the office of President of the United States just ten days after Madero was assassinated.¹⁷ Madero's assassination in February of 1913 led to the dilemma of President Wilson on the grounds of recognition. The Presbyterian upbringing and faith held by Wilson put him in a bind. Wilson considered himself to be a very moral and upright man who advocated working within a given system. The mere "fact" of the way Madero died was enough to shed doubt on the validity of Huerta's government.

Madero's permanent imprisonment would present a constant threat to Huerta and his government. For Huerta, there was only one way out. Why should Huerta worry about Madero's death? "The assassination of other Latin American political leaders had produced a few complaints."¹⁸ The assassination of Madero, however, created a sensation in the States. Nearly all the newspapers discredited the official statement of the Mexican government and condemned the crime.¹⁹ The death of Madero caused many to believe that Mexico was not capable of governing itself. "American public opinion was aroused against the Huerta administration, and this bode ill for his relations with the United States."²⁰

An important factor for the invasion of Veracruz was the attitude of the United States government. Woodrow Wilson's administration came into office on March 4, 1913, and refused to recognize the Mexican government under Huerta.²¹ President Wilson concluded that the revolution being waged by Huerta was evil. "The provisional government of Mexico was regarded as a pathological case; the Mexican Republic was sick, and the President of the United States was going to heal it."²² President Wilson was going to teach the Mexicans to choose good men.²³ "Huerta was a symbol for all that was wrong with Latin American governments."²⁴

By far, the greatest event leading to the invasion of Veracruz was the incident at Tampico. The incident at Tampico was actually three events: the arrest of several American sailors and their commanding officer at Tampico on the 9th of April; the detention of mail courier at Veracruz on the 11th of April; and the delay of an official State Department dispatch in Mexico City, also on the 11th of April.

Tampico was an important port city for the export of Mexican oil. The foreigners in Tampico were mostly American. Tampico had the second largest foreign community in Mexico. United States naval vessels had been stationed in both Tampico and Veracruz for some time. The naval forces at Tampico were under the command of Admiral Mayo. It was not uncommon for the United States to place ships in the harbors

of large cities to protect American nationals. The larger number of American ships found in the coastal waters of Mexico, were there to remind Huerta of the United States' displeasure of his government. In the case of a serious attack on the city of Tampico by the Constitutionalists, who were battling Huerta, the United States navy was to secure the safety of its nationals. An attack of the Constitutionalists against the Federal troops in Tampico is what set up the first incident.

The relaying of messages to other ships in the harbor and the evacuation of foreign nationals had almost exhausted the supplies that the ships carried. Having found a German national who was willing to sell several cans of gasoline, a crew was ordered to the dock of the warehouse of the German national to pick up the gasoline. "As a precaution, the whaleboat flew the colors fore and aft."²⁵ The Americans arrived at their destination and began loading the gasoline into the whaleboat. Federal troops arrived and arrested the American sailors. "Two of the sailors were taken at gunpoint from a naval vessel flying the American flag."²⁶ The sailors were soon released after the confusion had been cleared up. The Federal troops were simply nervous about any uniformed person, due to the attacks of the Constitutionalist forces. Morelos Zaragoza, the military governor of Tampico was shocked at what had happened and ordered the immediate release of the American sailors.

It may have been a simple mistake made by those involved in the incident, those who originated it and those who carried it out; however, Admiral Mayo, did not see it in this same light. He blew the incident out of all proportion stating: that a boat flying the flag of the United States is sovereign property of the United States.²⁷ Mayo felt that the arrest had publicly disgraced the United States when its sailors were marched to the area commanders office. The incident occurred in a residential area of Tampico, so it is unlikely that many people even knew that the American sailors had been arrested.

Mayo demanded that Morelos Zaragoza send him, by a ranking member of his staff, a written apology for the arrest of the Americans, and assurances that the officer in charge, during the arrest, would be severely punished. Mayo's last demand was that the Mexicans place the American flag in a place of prominence in the harbor and give it a 21 gun salute.²⁸

Mayo's decision was made based on his own judgment without appealing to a higher office. The American Consul in Tampico, Clarence Miller, was shocked at the turn of events. Even though Miller disagreed with what Mayo was doing, there was no way for him to voice his disapproval, for all communication went through the navy. All of this happened while the President, Woodrow Wilson, was vacationing in West

Virginia. Yet, President Wilson backed up all of Admiral Mayo's demands. Once the message of the incident had been sent from Mayo, to the Naval Department, to the State Department, then to the President, Wilson agreed with the action taken thus far.

It was the customary act of the United States government to give "de facto" recognition to any government which showed itself capable of providing some type of order. Yet, Wilson responded that he would not recognize a government of butchers. The man whom Woodrow Wilson picked to represent the American interest in Mexico, John Lind, the former governor of Minnesota, had no experience in the matters of Mexico, yet Wilson trusted him.²⁹ The young Nelson O'Shaughnessy, who was on good terms with Huerta and who worked in the embassy in Mexico, was by passed, and a non-established channel of diplomatic exchange was pursued by Wilson in regard to problems between the United States and Mexico.

President Wilson decided to try mediation as a means of settling the so called "differences" between the two countries. Wilson chose Lind to be his personal representative. Lind left Washington on August 4, with a planned settlement drafted by President Wilson for Huerta.³⁰ One of the elements in the proposal called for free and early elections, but the element Huerta found unacceptable was the one where Huerta must not be a candidate in the election. Lind was told that he must

possess proper credentials, that of ambassador. The foreign affairs minister, Federico Gamboa, replied, stating that Huerta refused to drop his candidacy. Lind tried a bit of personal pressure stating, that unless Huerta accept Wilson's "proposal" America would intervene.³¹

When the mediation was rejected, Wilson approached the American Congress, in the spring of 1914, saying:

"We can afford to exercise the self-restraint of a really great nation, which realized its own strength and scorns to misuse it. It was our duty to offer our active assistance. It is now our duty to show what true neutrality will do to enable the people of Mexico to set their affairs in order again and wait for further opportunity to offer our friendly counsels. The door is not closed against the resumption, either upon the initiative of Mexico or upon our own, of the effort to bring order out of the confusion by friendly cooperative action, should fortunate occasion offer."³²

When Wilson's plan of settlement had been totally rejected by Huerta, Wilson turned to negotiation with the revolutionaries, but even that failed.³³ America's failure at negotiation was a signal of the ineptness of its diplomatic staff. The report of the arrest of the American sailors "as" Marines was an error of small importance. Nelson O'Shaughnessy released to American reporters that the captured Americans were Marines, and for several days the American government thought the captured were Marines, showing the lack of information on the part of its diplomatic corps. The use of words by O'Shaughnessy describing the "parading" of the American

sailors, as opposed to "marched", designated an "insult" to the American people. Thus two small errors resulted in a larger problem.

President Wilson returned from White Sulphur Springs on Monday, April 13. Arriving from Mexico, was John Lind, who admitted that, diplomatically nothing could be done to remove Huerta.³⁴ Both Lind and William Jennings Bryan, the Secretary of State, consulted with the President on the situation in Mexico. The President decided to take action with Huerta after consulting Lind and Bryan. Wilson "could" justify his act of intervention with a precedent which had occurred about sixty years before when American ships shelled Greytown, Nicaragua, in response to an alleged insult to the American consul stationed in that city.³⁵

The issue of the incidents of Tampico definitely shows that Wilson did not know what had happened in Mexico.³⁶

"He was completely unaware of the story in the Herald, which had appeared three days earlier (it was after all, an opposition newspaper), and he did not see the dispatches from Fletcher, which proved Canada's account to be erroneous. Worst of all, Wilson misread what little evidence he did have. He said that the orderly had been "put into jail," which Canada had never said. And he referred to the "nominal punishment" inflicted on the "officer" who arrested him and asserted that Larue had been "picked out" from the many persons constantly . . . going ashore on various errands from various warships in the harbor, representing several nations."³⁷

The "Herald" was the New York Herald which stated what truly went on. Canada was the American consul at Veracruz, and reported that Seaman Larue, mail courier, had been arrested by a policeman and taken to jail. Larue was taken to jail, only because the police station and the jail were one and the same.³⁸ The incident involving the delay of an official State Department dispatch was due to the strict enforcement of censor-ship laws. A dispatcher innocently held a dispatch from Bryan to the U.S. embassy. When O'Shaughnessy had not received the reply from a dispatch he sent out earlier, he called the telegraph office and the matter was cleared in two minutes. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy stated that "Nelson arranged that matter in two minutes, over the phone when it was brought to the attention of the cable authorities."³⁹

These "small" matters would have ended if it had not been for the determination of Wilson to build his defense against the alleged hostile acts of Huerta's government against the U.S.; and as before, Wilson did not try to verify the reports before he made his charges.⁴⁰

The last and perhaps the most serious of diplomatic blunders was committed on the part of Nelson O'Shaughnessy. O'Shaughnessy agreed without consent from higher officials that if Huerta gave the 21 gun salute demanded by Mayo, the U.S. Navy would return the Mexican salute with an American one. Mayo would not hear of it. Thus, with all diplomatic

sources depleted, there was nothing left but military action.

Wilson's moment came on Saturday, April 18, when William Canada informed the State Department that on Tuesday, April 21, a steamer was scheduled to dock at Veracruz, with what was thought to be the largest shipment of arms ever to a Mexican port.⁴¹ "The feeling was that if the ammunition was landed it would strengthen the usurping president and increase the loss of life in Mexico."⁴² Wilson "saw" that there was no action left but to land, therefore, he ordered Admiral Fletcher to take Veracruz at once.⁴³

Admiral Fletcher who commanded the fleet at Veracruz received a dispatch on April 21, at 8:00 A.M. which read: "Seize Custom House. Do not permit war supplies to reach Huerta or any other party."⁴⁴ Admiral Fletcher landed a force of 787 men at Veracruz.⁴⁵ The Americans were greeted with gunfire. The total subjection of the town by the American forces did not occur until the next day. In this "engagement" to prevent Huerta's forces from receiving the arms shipment fifteen Americans and three hundred Mexicans had been killed.⁴⁶ The United States then occupied Veracruz for more than six months.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

This presentation of facts has been an attempt to show that President Woodrow Wilson, on April 21, 1914, based his decision to invade Veracruz on misguided, overly simplistic idealism rather than rational counsel and scholarly evaluation. What is clear is that President Wilson did not like Huerta.

It was stated that U.S. policy always recognized the de facto government. Whether or not it came to be legally is another question. Wilson made it clear that he did not consider Huerta the rightful ruler in Mexico and was bent on "freeing" the Mexican people of this tyrant and allowing them to choose their leader in a democratic or "American" way.

Wilson's diplomatic corps, in the area of Mexico, tended to be lacking. Wilson, an educated man, should have been more selective about who was to represent the U.S. in this troubled spot. "The provocations at Tampico seemed to be so small against their explosive sequel; many thought them trifles without true relationship to the result."⁴⁸ Even today a scholar may cite the sequence as proof that Wilson was a hypocrite and an aggressor.⁴⁹

Yet, it is almost as if Wilson had just been waiting for something like the Tampico affair to discredit Huerta. Wilson's entire Mexican policy was nothing more than the elimination of Victoriano Huerta. "Deprived of the revenues from the Veracruz customhouse and harassed by his domestic

enemies, Huerta finally resigned and fled in July, 1914."⁵⁰
Wilson, by his own mouth tells us why we took Veracruz in
1914 at a press conference on November 24, 1914.

"We got Huerta. That was the end of Huerta. That was
what I had in mind. It could not have been done without taking
Veracruz."⁵¹

FOOTNOTES

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² Ibid., p. 5.

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⁵ Calvert, Op. Cit., pp. 42-43.

⁶ Quirk, Op. Cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ DeVore, Op. Cit., p. 60.

⁹ Quirk, Op. Cit., p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Calvert, Op. Cit., p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Grieb, Kenneth J., The United States and Huerta. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969, p. 42.

¹⁶ Link, Arthur S., The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 30. 1914. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, pp. 69-70.

¹⁷ Quirk, Op. Cit., p. 8.

¹⁸ Grieb, Op. Cit., p. 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

²¹ DeVore, Op. Cit., p. 96.

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