

consequences for the future that upon its solution will in large part depend the development of our private wealth, today removed from that fecund center of labor and general prosperity.

4. PORFIRIO DÍAZ ASSESSES HIS LEGACY

For nearly thirty-five years (1876–1911), Mexico was under the effective control of one man, General Porfirio Díaz. According to the regime's propagandists, this prolonged period of relative stability provided a much needed respite from contentious politics and a golden opportunity for economic development under the expert guidance of Díaz's cadre of loyal científicos (technocrats). Economic development, in turn, was promoting the growth of democratic sensibilities in the Mexican people through expanded educational and employment opportunities. Much of that economic development would come from increased foreign investment drawn by generous financial incentives and guarantees of security. In this famous 1908 interview with American journalist James Creelman, Porfirio Díaz demonstrates his understanding of this developmentalist agenda as well as his mastery of public relations. The promise of free elections in the upcoming presidential campaign, probably intended for American rather than Mexican readers, encouraged the development of a political opposition that would eventually put an end to Díaz's authoritarian rule.

"It is a mistake to suppose that the future of democracy in Mexico has been endangered by the long continuance in office of one President," he said quietly. "I can say sincerely that office has not corrupted my political ideals and that I believe democracy to be the one true, just principle of government, although in practice it is possible only to highly developed peoples." . . .

"I received this Government from the hands of a victorious army at a time when the people were divided and unprepared for the exercise of the extreme principles of democratic government. [Díaz came to power in a military coup in 1876 after a disputed election.] To have thrown upon the masses the whole responsibility of government at once would have produced conditions that might have discredited the cause of free government."

"Yet, although I got power at first from the army, an election was held as soon as possible and then my authority came from the people. I have tried to leave the Presidency several times, but it has been pressed upon me and I remained in office for the sake of the nation which trusted me. The fact that the price of Mexican securities dropped eleven points when I was ill at Cuer-

James Creelman, "President Díaz, Hero of the Americas," *Pearson's Magazine* 19, no. 3 (March 1908): 234–245.

navaca indicates the kind of evidence that persuaded me to overcome my personal inclination to retire to private life."

"We preserved the republican and democratic form of government. We defended the theory and kept it intact. Yet we adopted a patriarchal policy in the actual administration of the nation's affairs, guiding and restraining popular tendencies, with full faith that an enforced peace would allow education, industry and commerce to develop elements of stability and unity in a naturally intelligent, gentle and affectionate people."

"I have waited patiently for the day when the people of the Mexican Republic would be prepared to choose and change their government at every election without danger of armed revolutions and without injury to the national credit or interference with national progress. I believe that day has come." . . .

"It is commonly held true that democratic institutions are impossible in a country which has no middle class," I [Creelman] suggested.

President Díaz turned, with a keen look, and nodded his head.

"It is true," he said. "Mexico has a middle class now; but she had none before. The middle class is the active element of society, here as elsewhere."

"The rich are too much preoccupied in their riches and in their dignities to be of much use in advancing the general welfare. Their children do not try very hard to improve their education or their character."

"On the other hand, the poor are usually too ignorant to have power."

"It is upon the middle class, drawn largely from the poor, but somewhat from the rich, the active, hard-working, self-improving middle class, that a democracy must depend for its government. It is the middle class that concerns itself with politics and with the general progress."

"In the old days we had no middle class in Mexico because the minds of the people and their energies were wholly absorbed in politics and war. Spanish tyranny and misgovernment had disorganized society. The productive activities of the nation were abandoned in successive struggles. There was general confusion. Neither life nor property was safe. A middle class could not appear under such conditions." . . .

"The future of Mexico is assured," he said in a clear voice. "The principles of democracy have not been planted very deep in our people, I fear. But the nation has grown and it loves liberty. Our difficulty has been that the people do not concern themselves enough about public matters for a democracy. The individual Mexican as a rule thinks much about his own rights and is always ready to assert them. But he does not think so much about the rights of others. He thinks of his privileges, but not of his duties. Capacity for self-restraint is the basis of democratic government, and the self-restraint is possible only to those who recognize the rights of their neighbors."

"The Indians, who are more than half of our population, care little for politics. They are accustomed to look to those in authority for leadership instead

of thinking for themselves. That is a tendency they inherited from the Spaniards, who taught them to refrain from meddling in public affairs and rely on the Government for guidance."

"Yet I firmly believe that the principles of democracy have grown and will grow in Mexico."

"But you have no opposition party in the Republic, Mr. President. How can free institutions flourish when there is no opposition to keep the majority, or governing party, in check?"

"It is true there is no opposition party. I have so many friends in the Republic that my enemies seem unwilling to identify themselves with so small a minority. I appreciate the kindness of my friends and the confidence of my country; but such absolute confidence imposes responsibilities and duties that tire me more and more."

"No matter what my friends and supporters say, I retire when my present term of office ends, and I shall not serve again. I shall be eighty years old then."

"My country has relied on me and it has been kind to me. My friends have praised my merits and overlooked my faults. But they may not be willing to deal so generously with my successor and he may need my advice and support; therefore I desire to be alive when he assumes office so that I may help him."

He folded his arms over his deep chest and spoke with great emphasis.

"I welcome an opposition party in the Mexican Republic," he said. "If it appears, I will regard it as a blessing, not as an evil. And if it can develop power, not to exploit but to govern, I will stand by it, support it, advise it and forget myself in the successful inauguration of complete democratic government in the country."

"It is enough for me that I have seen Mexico rise among the peaceful and useful nations. I have no desire to continue in the Presidency. This nation is ready for her ultimate life of freedom." . . .

"The railway has played a great part in the peace of Mexico," he continued. "When I became President at first there were only two small lines, one connecting the capital with Vera Cruz, the other connecting it with Querétaro. Now we have more than nineteen thousand miles of railways. Then we had a slow and costly mail service, carried on by stage coaches, and the mail coach between the capital and Puebla would be stopped by highwaymen two or three times in a trip, the last robbers to attack it generally finding nothing left to steal. Now we have a cheap, safe and fairly rapid mail service throughout the country with more than twenty-two hundred post-offices. Telegraphing was a difficult thing in those times. Today we have more than forty-five thousand miles of telegraph wires in operation."

"We began by making robbery punishable by death and compelling the execution of offenders within a few hours after they were caught and condemned. We ordered that wherever telegraph wires were cut and the chief

officer of the district did not catch the criminal, he should himself suffer; and in case the cutting occurred on a plantation the proprietor who failed to prevent it should be hanged to the nearest telegraph pole. These were military orders, remember."

"We were harsh. Sometimes we were harsh to the point of cruelty. But it was all necessary then to the life and progress of the nation. If there was any cruelty, results have justified it."

The nostrils dilated and quivered. The mouth was a straight line.

"It was better that a little blood should be shed than much blood should be saved. The blood that was shed was bad blood; the blood that was saved was good blood."

"Peace was necessary, even an enforced peace, that the nation might have time to think and work. Education and industry have carried on the task begun by the army." . . .

"And which do you regard as the greatest force for peace, the army or the schoolhouse?" I asked.

The soldier's face flushed slightly and the splendid white head was held a little higher.

"You speak of the present time?"

"Yes."

"The schoolhouse. There can be no doubt of that. I want to see education throughout the Republic carried on the national Government. I hope to see it before I die. It is important that all citizens of a republic should receive the same training, so that their ideals and methods may be harmonized and the national unity intensified. When men read alike and think alike they are more likely to act alike."

"And you believe that the vast Indian population of Mexico is capable of high development?"

"I do. The Indians are gentle and they are grateful, all except the Yacquis [Yaquis] and some of the Myas [Maya]. They have the traditions of an ancient civilization of their own. They are to be found among the lawyers, engineers, physicians, army officers and other professional men."

Over the city drifted the smoke of many factories.

"It is better than cannon smoke," I said.

"Yes," he replied, "and yet there are times when cannon smoke is not such a bad thing." . . .

5. PORFIRIO DÍAZ, VICEROY OF MEXICO

The Age of Díaz (1867–1911) enriched a favored few at the expense of Mexico's millions. Shortly after the dictator fell from power, a cultured Mexican exile wrote the following appraisal of the Díaz regime.