

The Alliance Between Lincoln and Juárez

by David Ramonet and Rubén Cota Meza

It would appear that there is no option but to continue the struggle with what we have, with whatever we can, and as far as we can. Forward then! No one should lose heart.

—Benito Juárez, April 1865

When Benito Juárez was sworn in as President of Mexico in July 1861, remnants of the disbanded army of the ultramontane reaction—which, under the slogan of “religion and privileges” had launched the war against the Federal Constitution of 1857—were still active. When the President announced a few months later that his government would suspend payment on the foreign debt, primarily to British, French, and Spanish financiers, for the purpose of reorganizing finances and beginning the rebuilding of the country following four decades of intermittent wars, the representatives of the ultramontane reaction in Europe offered the Mexican crown to Maximilian of Habsburg.

Foreign Invasion

The next year, the navies of France, England, and Spain arrived in Mexico to try to collect those debts. The French navy also came with the specific mission of overthrowing the constitutional government to pave the way for Maximilian’s arrival. Napoleon III offered financing to Maximilian for the adventure, with the promise of receiving the mines of Sonora and Baja California, among other things, in payment for services rendered.

On May 5, 1862, the French imperial army, led by General Laurencez, and its native ultramontane allies, launched their first assault on the Juárez government, and were defeated at Puebla.

The following year, with reinforcements and under a new commander, General Forey, the French seized the city of Puebla after a two-month siege. On May 31, 1863, with the

imperial army knocking at the doors of the capital, President Juárez led the closing ceremony at the National Congress, and then headed to the National Palace, where he watched the lowering of the Mexican flag over the Zócalo plaza, which was filled with people in anticipation of his farewell as President. After accepting the flag and singing the national anthem along with the crowd, he shouted, “Viva Mexico!” and thus began his famous black coach journey across the country, to safeguard the republic.

On June 7, 1863, the vanguard of the imperialist forces entered the Mexican capital, and on June 10, the army under the command of Forey and his ultramontane allies, who had pulled together their scattered forces, followed. The French established a regency to rule the country in the name of the Emperor. It was made up of Generals Juan Almonte and Mariano Salas, as well as Archbishop Pelagio Antonio de La-bastida y Dávalos. An Assembly of Notables was established, encompassing some 215 would-be aristocrats, to proclaim the Mexican empire.

Juárez installed his government in San Luis Potosí, and despite the circumstances, his political adversaries continued to criticize him for administrative minutiae. In the midst of this, he was also responsible for reforging the republic armies, which had fallen to the technical superiority of the occupying forces. After one year, he abandoned the city and moved to Saltillo, Coahuila, where he arrived on Jan. 9, 1864.

Juárez Fights Back

The military reverses suffered were devastating, and some liberals, such as his former minister Manuel Doblado and Gen. González Ortega, governor of Zacatecas, pressured him to abandon the Presidency and to cede it to someone more “reasonable,” who could reach an understanding with the occupation army. Juárez responded resolutely that he had not the slightest intention of abandoning the fight, much less leaving the leadership to weaklings who believed that one could negotiate with globalization, and somehow come out ahead.

From Saltillo, Juárez moved to Monterrey, Nuevo León, but soon clashed with Gov. Santiago Vidaurri, against whom he had to use force; ultimately, Vidaurri went over to the imperial side and ended up in front of a firing squad. In April 1864, Juárez established himself in Monterrey.

In the meantime, in Europe, the Commission of Notables offered Maximilian of Habsburg what they didn’t have to offer. He and his wife, Carlotta Amalia, arrived in Veracruz on May 28, 1864, and shortly thereafter began to form their imperial court.

In truth, he was never able to put together a real government. He tried to win the support of the moderate liberals and managed to seduce some of them, but lost the support of conservatives as a result. The latter were only interested in preserving the colonial regime which, although splintered

over the previous 40 years, had still kept the peonage system intact.

From Monterrey, Juárez returned to Saltillo in mid-1864, and then went further north, toward Durango, with the imperial forces always nipping at his heels, and with some of his tired collaborators seeking a truce. In September, he headed to Chihuahua, arriving in October.

The imperial army routed the republican armies, forcing them to resort to guerrilla warfare, with the famed *chinacos* (an irregular peasant army, known for its red bandana “uniform”) attacking the imperial army by night and carrying out their regular chores during the day. The imperial forces could take the cities, but couldn’t keep them, and as soon as they left, the *chinacos* took them back again. In effect, the imperial army only occupied the soil on which it stood.

While Juárez was setting up in Chihuahua, Maximilian’s advisors drafted a decree under the assumption that Juárez’s Presidential term would end on Nov. 20, 1865, and therefore also end the *raison d’être* of resistance. That didn’t trouble Juárez at all; however, from among his own ranks, Vice President González Ortega emerged, now with the support of Juárez’s “friends” such as Guillermo Prieto, to insist that the President step down.

President Juárez took stronger measures. He issued two decrees. One was to extend the Presidential term until it were possible to hold elections, and the other to order the arrest of González Ortega should he return from the United States, where he had gone for medical reasons.

Victory for Lincoln—and Juárez

By April 1865, however, the victory of Lincoln’s forces over the pro-slavery Confederacy, upon which the Mexican ultramontane forces and Emperor Napoleon III had based their hopes, was secure. From the beginning of Lincoln’s Presidency, Matías Romero had remained in Washington as the representative of Juárez’s government. From there, he had acted as a permanent intermediary between Lincoln and Juárez.

At this point, Juárez wrote the following to his family, which was transcribed by Ralph Roeder in his two-volume biography, *Juárez and His Mexico*:

“... I praise and applaud Mr. Lincoln’s inflexibility, for his victory will be all the more beneficial, though it come later, than an earlier peace won by sacrificing humanity. As my unforgettable Pepe would say, with our tenacious resistance and with time, we shall in the end bore through the French and with no need for foreign assistance, force them to abandon their iniquitous attempt to subjugate us. This is the greatest glory I wish for my nation. It is enough for us that the North destroys slavery and doesn’t recognize Maximilian’s empire. . . .

“Perhaps with his explicit declaration that he will not recognize Maximilian, Napoleon is contemplating a different

course in his interventionist policy toward Mexico. Yet even were he not doing so, the North's stance indicated in that declaration, combined with its victories, will cause great discouragement among the invaders and traitors to Mexico, if it hasn't already done so. They will naturally have to accept the fact that even were they to subjugate the entire Republic—a very difficult, if not impossible task—they will have gained little or nothing. For they stand before a colossus which, because of its great qualities and the principles of freedom it defends, won't hesitate to take up the defense of the oppressed and make the traitors and invaders disappear in a single blow. The enemy knows this very well, as does most of our Republic, and this quells the enthusiasm they felt in the early years of the intervention. It is my judgment that the end of their decadence is at hand, and the era of the people's reaction against their oppressors has begun."

However, Roeder writes, to rush the solution, Juárez was prepared to accept the material help of the neighbor, under his own terms:

"Should that Republic soon end its Civil War, and its government, acting as a friend and not a master, wish to lend us aid in the form of money or force, without demanding humiliating conditions, without our sacrificing one inch of our territory, without undermining our national dignity, we would accept it, and we have given confidential instructions to our minister to that effect. It would appear that there is no option but to continue the struggle with what we have, with whatever we can, and as far as we can. That is our duty: Time and perseverance shall help us. Forward then! No one should lose heart!"

In late 1865, Juárez moved to Paso del Norte (today, Ciudad Juárez), where he remained until mid-1866. In the interim, Napoleon III had received warnings from the Lincoln Administration, and had decided to withdraw his troops earlier than he had promised Maximilian. Once the imperial troops were withdrawn, the republican forces, which had begun to mop up the remnants of the ultramontane army, were able to start taking back territory. On June 10, Juárez returned to Chihuahua, and shortly thereafter, the United States fully recognized the republican government and sent its ambassador. In early 1867, all foreign troops left Mexico, leaving only the forces of the traitors Miguel Miramón, Leonardo Márquez, and Tomás Mejía, with the support of the business class and their pretensions of being aristocrats, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church—whom the owners of the PAN view as heroes to the present day.

Meanwhile, Juárez made his return trip to the capital. In February 1867, he was already in San Luis Potosí. Maximilian and his generals were holed up in Querétaro, where they held out until May 15. On May 24, Maximilian and his followers Miramón and Mejía were put on trial, and sentenced to death on June 15. At 7:00 in the morning on June 19, 1867, they were executed by firing squad at Cerro de las Campanas.