Why did the United States oppose the Mexican Revolution, and was it successful in achieving its goals?

Viewpoint: The United States opposed the Mexican Revolution because American business interests in Mexico were threatened.

Viewpoint: Despite President Woodrow Wilson's desire to influence political events in Mexico, American involvement had little direct impact on the Mexican Revolution.

On 26 February 1917 the United States received from British intelligence officers an intercepted telegram. Sent by German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann to the German ambassador in Mexico, the telegram proposed an alliance with Venustiano Carranza's government. If Carranza would support Germany in its war against England and France, Germany would support Mexico against the United States and help Mexico recapture the provinces of Texas, California, and New Mexico, lost to the United States in 1848.

The telegram inflamed American opinion and tilted the United States toward war against Germany. When Zimmerman sent his telegram in January 1917, there was an American army in Mexico, and the U.S. and Mexican governments had not enjoyed close relations since the Mexican Revolution had begun in 1911. What was the Mexican Revolution all about and how did the United States respond to it?

In these two essays, two different views of American responses to the Mexican Revolution are presented. In the first essay, scholar Robert D. Allinson analyzes American business investments in Mexico and theorizes that the United States became involved in the revolution as a way to protect those investments. In the second essay scholar Lonna Douglass argues that President Woodrow Wilson took a peculiar interest in Mexico as a way of demonstrating his ideas about national honor and purpose. In either case it is difficult to see the U.S. involvement in Mexico's revolution as a positive one. Wilson may have been on the side of the angels when he refused to recognize Victoriano Huerta. However, nonrecognition does not seem either to have hurt Huerta or to have encouraged the creation of a government more to Wilson's liking.

It is also difficult to see American involvement as the crucial factor in Mexico's revolution. American leaders should have quickly seen how little they could control, or even influence, the events in Mexico. The complicated motives and ambitions of the Mexican people, like those of the American people, are beyond the control of even the wisest statesmen. To fully understand the events in Mexico between 1910 and 1920, one needs to see the story from the perspective of Mexico, and not of the United States. Students encountering the Zimmermann Telegram are often puzzled and perplexed. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that American students rarely learn that Mexico had a revolution or that the United States twice in the early part of the twentieth century sent military forces to hold parts of Mexico: the occupation of Veracruz in 1914 and the expedition of 1916–1917.
Yet, Mexico's revolution did have a profound effect on the United States. It was the first great revolution since the French monarchy fell in 1789, and the last great "liberal" revolution, before Marxism became the dominant revolutionary ideology. In Mexico, it was still possible for nineteenth-century liberals such as Carranza to seem to cooperate with agrarian reformers such as Emiliano Zapata, before Leninist ideas of vanguard parties and correct lines became the order of the day. Mexico, then, avoided the fate of Russia, and its revolution achieved both a genuine elective government (even though only one party governed) and the social aims of the working people.

Viewpoint:
The United States opposed the Mexican Revolution because American business interests in Mexico were threatened.

"Poor Mexico," Porfirio Díaz said, "so far from God, so close to the United States." Díaz, president of the republic from 1877 to 1880 and from 1884 to 1910, had made the most of the connection with the United States, at the same time maintaining Mexico's independence. Mexico, once the seat of the Aztec and Mayan empires, had enriched the Spanish crown from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries but had its own resources depleted. Independence in the nineteenth century had promised liberation for all Mexico's dispossessed but instead had established the power of a ruling elite. By the end of the nineteenth century, as Mexico was stabilized under Díaz's dictatorship, the ruling elite consolidated its own economic power. Mexico's mineral resources—its petroleum, rubber, copper, gold, and silver—were increasingly concentrated in the hands of both the ruling elite and foreign investors. By 1910 nearly two-thirds of Mexico's export earnings were paid to foreigners, who owned 97 percent of Mexico's mines, 98 percent of its rubber exports, and 90 percent of its petroleum.

The Díaz regime had increased foreign control of Mexico's economy and also sought to decrease the holdings of individual Mexicans. Embracing the ideas of laissez-faire economists, Mexico's economic elite, called the científicos or "scientific ones," encouraged government policies that consolidated small holdings into larger rancheros. Small landholders and peasants became tenant farmers or poorly paid employees of larger landholders. The científicos also believed fervently in the benefits of free-market economy and so called for virtually no government regulation of the economy. The 1884 mining code virtually eliminated government regulation of mines; in 1892 the code was revised to give the government no role at all in the mining industry.

The economic depression of 1908 badly hurt Mexico's mining industry. Unemployment and starvation faced the Mexican people, particu-
trial workers and miners, who had opposed the regime, saw in Díaz’s fall the potential for further gains. The provisional government, however, would not allow this revolutionary activity—it turned its military against the Zapata rebellion in the south, and the federal police continued to break up strikes. Though some in Congress thought the time propitious to seize control of Mexico’s mines, Madero and the provisional government blocked any attempt at nationalization or land reform. Madero was a cautious reformer, not a revolutionary. Madero’s inability to achieve real reform and failure to change Mexico’s power structure meant that forces within the government would be able to challenge him. In February 1913 one of Madero’s own generals, Victoriano Huerta, deposed Madero and had him killed.

In Washington the Taft administration immediately considered the wishes of American business leaders, whose main goal was stability and the protection of their investments. American ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, urged recognition of Huerta to end the uncertainty of Mexico’s brief revolution. Taft, however, left office on 4 March, and Woodrow Wilson (no relation to the American ambassador) would have a different approach.

Wilson did not heed the call of American businessmen to recognize Huerta. He would not “recognize a government of butchers,” he said. Representatives from the Southern Pacific Railroad; Phelps, Dodge, and Company; Greene Cananea Copper Company; and the Mexican Petroleum Company all urged Wilson to recognize Huerta if the general promised to hold elections by 26 October 1913 (which he had already agreed to do) and if he would not be a candidate (which he had not promised).

Wilson’s decision not to recognize Huerta was strengthened when the governor of Coahuila, Victoriano Carranza, announced his intention to unite pro-Madero forces in a “Constitutionalist” movement. Carranza, supported by Villa and other revolutionaries, would be a counterweight to Huerta. When Huerta arrested 110 members of Congress on 10 October 1913 and assumed military control, Wilson began taking a harder line and sent his personal representative, William Bayard Hale, to Nogales, Mexico, to open negotiations with Carranza’s representatives.

While Carranza, who formed his own provisional government on 17 October at Hermosillo, and Wilson were agreed that Huerta was not an acceptable president, they would never work together to oust the general. Wilson proposed that the United States declare war against Mexico, that the U.S. Navy blockade Mexico and support Carranza’s revolutionary campaign against Huerta. Carranza found this completely unacceptable—he would not accept the idea that the United States would dictate policy to Mexico, and he knew that aid did not come freely. If the United States moved to oust Huerta, Carranza knew it would be a violation of Mexico’s sovereignty.

Carranza wisely refused American aid in his campaign against Huerta, as he recognized the depth of American control over Mexico’s economy. Carranza, while not a radical (like Madero, he was from Mexico’s upper class), understood that in order to secure its independence Mexico must be able to control its own resources, and to do this required independence from American capitalists.

While publicly Wilson maintained that his administration merely wanted to ensure that Mexico had a stable government chosen in accordance with the rudiments of law, the administration turned against Carranza when the Mexican Revolution began to threaten American investments. Particularly after 1915, the Wilson administration became concerned with the growing radicalism of the revolution. Secretary of State Robert Lansing warned the Carranza govern-
ment not to seize American property in 1916, and the United States increasingly saw every move by the Mexican government to regulate industry as a step toward outright nationalization. The Carranza government began moving to regulate Mexico’s mining and petroleum industries, reversing the laissez-faire policies of Díaz and the cientificos. Wilson and Lansing saw these moves as steps toward nationalization, and rather than engaging Carranza on his own terms, the Wilson administration, heeding the call of American capitalists, tried to overturn the Carranza regime.

In January 1916 the Mexican Departamento de Fomento canceled contracts with the Maritime Oil Company, which had been given the rights to drill for oil off Veracruz and Tamaulipas. When Lansing instructed special agent John R. Silliman to warn Carranza not to nationalize, Silliman refused. The Carranza government, he said, was not about to nationalize the petroleum industry. However, Lansing knew better—he rebuked Silliman, informing him that he knew what the Mexican government was up to, and he did not like it. The Mexican government was trying to “deprive American citizens of properties legally acquired by them under Mexican laws in effect at the time of purchase,” a 1926 State Department official wrote. This situation, the United States insisted, was the cause for all the trouble with succeeding Mexican governments.

The problem for the United States in overturning Carranza was its inability to find a more congenial leader. Some business leaders in the United States saw Villa as a potential savior—Villa had protected American property in the northern part of Mexico, and during his resistance to Huerta, Villa had been supplied by Americans through El Paso. Villa, as commander of the Division of the North, had ostensibly fought under Carranza for the Constitutionalists. However, Villa tired of Carranza’s middle-class leadership, and joined forces with Zapata, the revolutionary leader of the south, to turn Mexico’s bourgeois, republican revolution into a social revolution. It seems a strange alliance, between American capital and a revolutionary leader such as Villa, and yet some American businesses saw Villa as a potential ally. He had spared American property, warmly received American journalists, and appeared to some Americans as the Mexican version of either Robin Hood or Theodore Roosevelt. Unlike the inflexible Carranza, Villa seemed open to bargaining. W. D. Pierce, a mining engineer with the Cusihuirachic Mining Company, had his career temporarily halted by the civil war in Chihuahua. He returned to work in January 1916, writing his brother that Americans actually had more to fear from Carranza than from Villa: “Yet Carranza is more to be feared than was Villa. Villa at least had courage and enforced orders, which is more than I can say of Carranza. Carranza fears Villa more than anything else and if he can make any trouble for us Americans and at the same time make it appear that it was Villa who made the trouble, you may be sure that he will do it.” Other American businessmen also saw Villa as an honest and courageous fighter, while they saw Carranza as a duplicitous politician.

Villa was not able to sustain his revolutionary career. His military campaigns against the Carrancistas failed, and Villa took more openly to robbery to support his dwindling forces. Villa was determined to draw the United States into his conflict with Carranza and may have been instigated in part by his American agent, Felix Sommerfeld, who was also a secret agent for the German government. Villa at first had protected American property, but with Carranza’s growing power Villa hoped to demonstrate to American business that only he could protect their Mexican investments. Pierce was returning to the Cusihuirachic mine in January 1916 when his train was stopped by a detachment of Villistas. Pierce and seventeen other Americans on the train were taken off, stripped, robbed, and shot to death.

Was this massacre committed under Villa’s orders? He denied it, but his men were involved. Why had they robbed the train? Perhaps to show that Carranza, whatever his pretense, could not control the internal affairs of Chihuahua, nor protect American lives or property. Villa’s raid on Columbus, New Mexico, on 8–9 March 1916 similarly showed Carranza’s weakness. At the same time, Villa’s forces had dwindled almost into insignificance—hence the attack on the United States. In response the United States sent an expedition under General John J. Pershing into Mexico, but the punitive expedition was not able to find Villa. Even as Pershing was searching for Villa, American business interests were also trying to find the elusive rebel. U.S. senator Albert Bacon Fall (R-New Mexico), closely identified with American oil interests, hoped that the Pershing expedition heralded a full-scale invasion of Mexico and that the United States would occupy the entire country. Some American businesses, even while Pershing was trying to arrest Villa, sought to contact him and help Villa topple the Carranza regime. Fall’s associate, cattleman Charles Hunt, offered to conduct negotiations between Villa and Fall, which would lead to U.S. support for a Villista republic in northern Mexico. Villa, they hoped, could break the north away from Carranza and establish a government more in line with their interests.
Villa rejected these flattering offers when he learned of them, but American businesses did not stop looking for sympathetic Mexicans to protect their investments. American business interests were diverted from Mexico by American entry into World War I, and in fact some American businessmen, whose interests were in Europe or in British territories, resented the attention paid to the investments of businesses in Mexico. Ten years of bloody revolution and civil war in Mexico ended with the establishment of a civilian government. President Álvaro Obregón, elected after the assassinations of Carranza and Zapata, but before the assassination of Villa, secured peace by promising land reform to the Zapatistas, the Villistas, and other social revolutionaries, and his government and subsequent administrations pursued the nationalization policies of the Constitutionalists. Aside from the real reforms of the revolution, however, Mexico remains as Díaz had left it, far from God and close to the United States.

—ROBERT D. ALLISON, SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

Viewpoint: Despite President Woodrow Wilson’s desire to influence political events in Mexico, American involvement had little direct impact on the Mexican Revolution.

Woodrow Wilson wanted to teach Victoriano Huerta a lesson. Huerta, a military leader under Mexico’s interim president, Francisco Indalecio Madero, had conspired against Madero in 1913 and had him killed. Huerta then became interim president, holding power until a new election could be held. Wilson, newly elected as president of the United States, was determined to change the world and wanted all to know he would not tolerate such atrocities as Huerta’s coup d’état.

Wilson reversed a longstanding American policy and did not recognize the Huerta regime. The American policy of recognition had been established in 1793 by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, when France’s revolutionary government sent an envoy to the United States. This decision put President George Washington in a dilemma: the United States had a treaty with France’s king, Louis XVI; should he now receive a representative from the faction that had cut off the king’s head? Jefferson said yes. The U.S. treaty was with the French nation, and now, apparently, the French nation had chosen a new form of government. They had followed a principle, Jefferson argued, established in the United States, that people could change their governments at will. Since 1793 the United States had recognized nations, not regimes, and recognition did not imply support for the regime or sympathy for the rulers.

Wilson, however, unlike Jefferson and Washington, believed that morality should govern in international relations. The United States would teach Huerta, and other ambitious generals, a lesson and so would help the Mexican people establish a democratic government. Within Mexico an opposition to Huerta had already formed, centered in the south, where Emiliano Zapata’s resistance continued, and in the north, where Venustiano Carranza, the governor of Coahuila, announced the formation of a “Constitutionalist” movement to oppose Huerta. Carranza quickly secured the support of influential political and military leaders in Sonora and Chihuahua, notably Francisco “Pancho” Villa. He formed a provisional government in Nogales, and his generals began moving against the Huertistas.

Wilson thought that this development presented an opportunity. He thought that the United States could declare war against Mexico. No U.S. troops would be sent, but the U.S. Navy would blockade Mexico’s ports to prevent other nations, notably Germany and England, from supplying the Huerta government with arms. Carranza and his forces could then move against the poorly armed federales more easily, and the joint U.S.-Constitutionalist exercise would topple the dictatorship. It might have been a reasonable plan, but Carranza refused. He would not tolerate any action by the United States against Mexico’s sovereignty—the United States could not dictate to the Mexican people what kind of government they would have.

Wilson, the great international moralist, had met his match. Carranza refused American aid against Huerta on principle and proved just as inflexible as Wilson, whom journalist H. L. Mencken called “the archangel Woodrow.” Miffed by Carranza’s unwillingness to be helped, the Wilson administration took no further actions until February 1914, when it revoked its embargo against the Constitutionalists.

In April 1914 the Wilson administration faced a further crisis in Mexico. In the port city of Tampico, which the Huertistas held though it was besieged by the Constitutionalists, the paymaster and several sailors from the USS Dolphin went ashore to get gasoline. They had unwittingly, and without permission from local authorities, entered a war zone. A federale colonel had the men arrested. When his commanding officer learned of the arrest, he ordered the
Americans be released immediately and sent a personal apology to Admiral Henry T. Mayo. Mayo was not satisfied with the apology. He demanded that the Tampico military authorities show their submission by firing a twenty-one-gun salute to the U.S. flag. Mexico City now entered the negotiations, and Huerta saw the irony in the situation. Since the United States did not recognize his government, he wondered, what would be the point of having his government salute the U.S. flag? He suggested to the admiral that his forces in Tampico would salute the U.S. flag, and the U.S. fleet could salute the Mexican flag.

Wilson, who seemed never to see the humor in any situation, took a hard line with Huerta. He warned the Mexican government that it would either salute the U.S. flag or face the consequences, and on 20 April, Wilson asked Congress to permit him to use military force to obtain redress from Mexico for the insult at Tampico. London's Economist said, “If war is to be made on points of punctilio raised by admirals and generals, and if the government of the United States is to set the example for this return to mediaeval conditions it will be a bad day for civilization.”

A bad day it would be, and Europe in the next four years experienced many bad days. Meanwhile in Mexico, the German steamship Tripanga was steaming toward Veracruz with a cargo of weapons and ammunition for the Huertista government. Armed with permission from Congress to use military force against Huerta, Wilson ordered American forces to invade Veracruz, which they did on 21 April 1914. In several days of fighting 19 Americans and 126 Mexican soldiers and marines died before the Huertistas were forced to evacuate Veracruz, which now was occupied by six thousand American marines and sailors.

Huerta believed that an American invasion would benefit him, as it would force his enemies in Mexico either to side with the Americans and so be branded as traitors, or to show their patriotism by siding with him. Carranza, the leader of the Constitutionalists, avoided this dilemma by condemning the American invasion and continuing his opposition to Huerta. This plan was possible because, once the Americans had seized Veracruz, they did not really know what to do with it. Some in the American force thought they should continue on to take Mexico City, but Wilson recognized that the United States was not prepared for a full invasion of Mexico. Simply holding Veracruz should have been enough to pressure Huerta. However, it was not.

The American military remained in Veracruz for five months, cleaning the streets, digging sewer lines, and installing screens in windows. The city was healthier and safer when they left, but other than that it is difficult to determine the long-term effect of the American occupation. When the Americans had entered Veracruz, Huerta was in power, and Carranza was the “first chief” of the Constitutionalist revolution, with Zapata in the south and Villa in the north forming the military arms of the revolution. By October, when the Americans left Veracruz, Huerta had abdicated, and while Carranza remained the “first chief,” Villa and Zapata had broken with him, pushing for a more radical social revolution rather than the bourgeois political revolution Carranza represented.

Had the American occupation of Veracruz influenced this outcome? It can be argued that by holding the port, the Americans had deprived Huerta of military supplies. The American occupation, however, did not supply Carranza or the other rebels with arms, and even if Wilson had wanted to tip the balance to Carranza, the occupation of Veracruz was not intended to do so. The occupation was meant to intimidate Huerta, and while he abdicated as Americans held Veracruz, it is difficult to see a cause and effect in the occupation and his abdication.

As the American troops evacuated Veracruz, Villa and other military leaders called a convention at Aguascalientes to plan further strategy. The convention marks the break between Villa and Zapata, the social and military revolutionaries, and Carranza, the bourgeois and political revolutionary. With Huerta gone, the revolution turned from a struggle of Constitutionalists against Huertistas into a struggle between the Convention, or Villistas and Zapatistas, and Constitutionalists, or Carrancistas.

Villa, his political and military stars in decline after 1914, took to robbery to support his army. Villa had been alone among the Constitutionalists in supporting the American occupation of Veracruz, and perhaps he believed the United States would support his faction in the ensuing war against Carranza. Villa, in fact, tried to provoke American intervention in Mexico, just as Huerta may have welcomed an American invasion. Having the United States violate Mexico’s sovereignty would either show that Carranza was an American puppet, or would force Carranza to use his forces against the Americans, rather than against the Villistas. In January 1916 Villa’s forces attacked a train carrying American mining engineers to a site in Chihuahua, killing eighteen Americans. In March, Villa and his forces attacked the town of Columbus, New Mexico, the first foreign invasion of mainland United States since 1815. Wilson ordered a Punitive Expedition, commanded by General John J. Pershing, into Mexico to capture Villa.
**THE ZIMMERMANN NOTE**

Berlin, January 19, 1917

On the first of February we intend to begin submarine warfare unrestricted. In spite of this it is our intention to keep neutral the United States of America.

If this attempt is not successful we propose an alliance on the following basis with Mexico: That we shall make war together and together make peace. We shall give general financial support, and it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona. The details are left for your settlement.

You are instructed to inform the President of Mexico of the above in the greatest confidence as soon as it is certain there will be an outbreak of war with the United States, and we suggest that the President of Mexico on his own initiative should communicate with Japan suggesting adherence at once to this plan; at the same time offer to mediate between Germany and Japan.

Please call to the attention of the President of Mexico that the employment of ruthless submarine warfare now promises to compel England to make peace in a few months.

Zimmermann


Pershing was an able commander, experienced in the Philippines (he had so impressed President Theodore Roosevelt that he promoted Pershing above other officers, from major to general). He was hampered, however, by several important facts. One, he was sent to Mexico to find Villa. Villa knew the territory; Pershing did not. Two, the Carranza government, while it was also fighting against Villa, did not welcome American aid and in fact looked upon the United States as an invading force. Worse for Pershing, his army and his few airplanes could find no trace of Villa, and the further they marched into Mexico the more elusive Villa became. Almost immediately, as Pershing's army ventured deeper into Mexico, the United States and the Carranza government sought a diplomatic solution to the impasse. Commissioners from the United States and from Mexico met in various American cities, with the United States beginning the sessions by insisting that as the price of American withdrawal, the Carranza government agree to protect the property of American citizens (that is, not to nationalize it). Carranza's negotiators refused, insisting that the commission was not the appropriate forum for discussing internal Mexican affairs. Ultimately, with the United States being drawn into the European war, Wilson and the Americans were forced to realize that they could not dictate to Carranza. In return for American withdrawal from Mexico, the United States received almost nothing.

The U.S. Punitive Expedition failed to find Villa. However, it did have some important results. First, Villa's attack on Columbus effectively ended any chance the United States might support him against Carranza. No matter what American business interests might have desired, the U.S. government could not, and would not, help Villa after he had attacked the United States.

Second, the weakness and utter futility of the American force in Mexico convinced German leaders that the United States would not be able to mobilize quickly if they did join the war on England's side. In early 1917 England was nearly exhausted by the war; Ireland had rebelled; Russia was on the verge of revolution; and Germany seemed on the road to victory. To win, Germany needed to restrict England's military and grain supplies. By sinking American ships bringing food and weapons to England, Germany cut off England's lifeline, but it also threatened to bring America into the war. German leaders who had advocated unrestricted submarine warfare against American shipping were stymied by the fear of other German leaders that this policy would bring the United States into the war. Now, with the failure of the American punitive expedition, German leaders saw they had little to fear from American entry into a European war.

Villa and Zapata had emerged as the revolution's folk heroes, but the Carrancistas maintained control of Mexico until 1920 and influenced the course of Mexican history. At the same time, the ideas of the social revolution, the Convention's program of land reform and breaking up of haciendas, came to be the defining impulse of the revolution. So, while it is impossible to say that Villa and Zapata won the revolution, it is equally impossible to say that the Villistas or Zapatistas lost. They did not overthrow Carranza, but they achieved a more democratic Mexican society. It is equally problematic to say that Carranza won or lost. He never won the affection of the Mexican people, but his steadfast, obstinate insistence on a liberal constitutional order culminated in Mexico's political stability under republican government since 1920.
Who, then, lost in the Mexican revolution? Certainly Díaz and Huerta, the military leaders who sought to control the country through dictatorial power, but the other loser would have to be Wilson. His attempt to control events, through manipulating Carranza and Villa, failed utterly.

—LONNA DOUGLASS, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

References

Kenneth J. Grieb, *The United States and Huerta* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969);


Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998);


Herbert Malloy Mason Jr., *The Great Pursuit* (New York: Random House, 1970);


John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (London & New York: Appleton, 1914);

Robert Freeman Smith, *The United States and Revolutionary Nationalism in Mexico, 1916–1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972);