



Counterfactual Mexico

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Abstract

For many generations, historians searched for deep and immutable structures, inexorable trends that persist over *longues durées*, big pictures in which details do not matter very much. Now we live in a world of accidents, contingencies, and multiple meanings, so we have turned our attention to natural disasters, unique cultural expressions, and the idiosyncrasies of individuals both small and large. This is all to the good, but it does not go far enough. We already have so many history books that tell us so much about what really occurred in the past, that what we need now are books about what did not happen – but might have, or perhaps even should have happened: Counterfactual history, that is, history that is contrary to fact. Take the case of Mexican independence. Everyone knows the basic outlines of the story from Father Hidalgo in 1810 to General Iturbide's coup in 1821. Of course, there is still a lot for historians to squabble about, but they are all fighting about the causes or significance of what really happened. This is like a boxing match between fighters dressed in straightjackets. Mexico lost three opportunities to secure its independence from Spain, protect itself from the territorial ambitions of the United States, and propel its economy into the “First World” between 1776 and 1812. These lost opportunities point to counterfactual “histories” of Mexico that are much more interesting than the real history.

I

In 1776, the Spanish territories in North America included all of what is today Mexico (about 2 million square kilometers) plus the northern territories called the “*provincias internas*” lost to the United States in 1848 (another 2.4 million), plus Louisiana and Florida (perhaps another 1.5 million or so). Total size: nearly 7 million square kilometers with a population (excluding indigenous nomads) of approximately 5 million. In that year, GDP probably amounted to about 40 pesos (or dollars) per capita.

Compared to the thirteen British colonies in North America, the North American colonies of Spain were seven times larger and twice as populous. British North America had a somewhat higher GDP per capita, but the difference was not large (see Table 1).

Then came the disasters. In 1800, Spain ceded Louisiana to Napoleon, who sold it to the United States in 1803. In 1846–48, the United States seized most of the old *provincias internas* (including the rich California gold

Table 1. What really happened.

	Spanish North America – Mexico	British 13 colonies – USA
Territory (million sq km)		
1775	6.9	1.5
1800	4.5	2.9
1825	4.5	3.0
1850	2.0	5.0
Population (millions)		
1775	4.5	2.5
1800	5.8	5.5
1825	6.5	13.4
1850	7.5	23.0
GDP per capita (dollars)		
1775	40	60
1800	40	75
1825	27	100
1850	32	135

mines). Between 1775 and 1850, the population of the United States increased by nearly ten times, while that of Mexico grew by only 50 percent. By 1850, the United States was an industrial power, while Mexico had fallen far behind.

All of these disasters could have been avoided, if only Mexico had rebelled against Spain a few years earlier than it did. Or if the United States has been successful in seizing Canada, which it invaded and attempted to annex three decades before it attacked Mexico.

II

Let us begin with 1776 – Mexico’s first opportunity lost. On July 4, rebellious (and mostly amateur) politicians in the thirteen British colonies in North America met in Philadelphia and “declared” their independence. Two years later, France declared support for the rebellion. Spain entered the war as an ally of France and the North American rebels in June 1779, after France promised to help Spain recover Gibraltar and Florida from Britain.

But suppose Mexico’s economic elite of unhappy Creole landowners and merchants, many of whom held minor posts in the civil bureaucracy, had decided to rebel in 1776 like their North American brothers. If Mexico had rebelled, neither France nor Spain would have intervened to aid the British colonists. Without foreign aid, the British colonists in North America would have lost their war for independence. Since the British government had little interest in assuming the costs of managing vast territories on the American continent, British North America would

Table 2. What might have happened.

	Spanish North America – Mexico	British 13 colonies – EE UU
Territory (million sq km)		
1775	7.0	1.5
1800	5.0	1.5
1825	5.0	1.5
1850	5.0	1.5
Population (millions)		
1775	4.5	2.5
1800	5.8	3.5
1825	7.5	5.0
1850	9.7	6.9
GDP per capita (dollars)		
1775	40	60
1800	40	60
1825	55	71
1850	76	84

have been confined to the Atlantic seaboard and eastern Canada for at least a generation or two. With her North American colonies subdued by 1778 or 1779, Britain would have been in an excellent position to help Mexico consolidate its independence from Spain.

One or two generations is approximately what it takes for most new states to consolidate territory and resolve internal civil strife. Had Mexico's domestic strife ended in the 1820s rather than 1867, its economic growth could have begun fifty years earlier and in more favorable international economic conditions. Table 2 shows what might have happened. In the table, Louisiana is subtracted from Mexico's potential territory but not added to that of the United States on the assumption that either Spain or France would have retained possession. Mexico's population growth is assumed to have doubled and economic growth is allowed to begin in 1800. For the United States (still under British rule) population and economic growth are assumed to have slowed to one half of what really occurred.

The scenario portrayed in Table 2 seems almost impossible and fantastic. It is easier to imagine a British victory over Washington than a Mexican revolt against Charles III and his popular Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli. On the other hand, the Spanish colonial regime had raised taxes dramatically since the end of the Seven Years War (1758–63), indigenous riots and rebellions were becoming more and more common, and Spain's ability to provide security at home and on the seas faced numerous and growing challenges.

The North American protests against British rule began when the British government sought to impose a small tariff on tea and other

imports along with a modest stamp tax to cover the cost of protecting the colonists from indigenous guerrillas and their ships from foreign navies. When the colonists protested, the British government withdrew the taxes. At the time of the famous U.S. declaration of independence, the only taxes levied in the British colonies were local taxes imposed by municipal or provincial governments to cover local expenses. Not one penny left the colonies as revenue for the Mother Country. In contrast, Spain extracted millions of pesos in revenues every year from New Spain. And there were many other complaints as well – the preference given Spaniards born in Spain for all the highest offices in the colonial government, for example. Mexicans had good reason to rebel; the North Americans had hardly any reason at all.

III

Mexico lost a second opportunity between 1796 and 1808. During these years, Spain was at war against Great Britain as an ally of the French Republic and then Napoleon. Spain imposed huge new tax increases, including the *consolidación de vales reales* that provoked numerous bankruptcies and cost the Catholic Church most of its tithe revenues. In these years, Mexican rebels could have counted on aid from Britain for protection from any Spanish effort to send troops to reconquer the colony. In fact, after the British naval victory at Trafalgar in 1805, the French and Spanish navies virtually ceased to exist.

Had Mexico's elite opted for independence between 1796 and 1808, after the independence of the United States, the scenario sketched in Table 2 would have been less favorable to Mexico, but still better than it was two decades later. With Mexico in revolt, Charles IV would have been pressured to abandon the French alliance and seek a separate peace with Britain. The British, always willing to alter alliances for the right price, would have demanded Cuba, but would probably have accepted Louisiana to protect Canada. Even without British Louisiana as a buffer against the United States, Mexico would have been much more stable, unified, and economically dynamic by 1846 and thus much more likely to have successfully resisted the U.S. invasion.

The third opportunity for Mexico occurred during the "War of 1812" between Great Britain and the United States. While ostensibly fought over the rights of neutral ships and shipping in wartime, the United States invaded Canada with the objective of annexing it. This is the war that Canadians refer to as the Canadian war for independence, not from Britain but from the United States. Distracted by events in Europe, Britain provided little help to the Canadian defenders. Had the United States succeeded in annexing Canada in 1812, it would have taken a generation or two (at least) to complete the conquest and absorb the new territories. In this counterfactual history, Sam Houston would have gone to Ontario

instead of Texas and Mexico would not have faced either a U.S. invasion in 1846 or the French occupation after 1862.

IV

The lessons to be drawn from these three lost opportunities are perfectly clear. First, Mexico's economic and political elite should have revolted against Spain, the 18th-century imperial superpower, much sooner. Second, the Mexican government should have moved more quickly to exploit favorable international conjunctures that might have weakened this potential external enemy. And third, Mexican diplomats should have encouraged the United States to steal the territories it wanted from others. None of these lessons provide any guidance for the 21st century.

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