

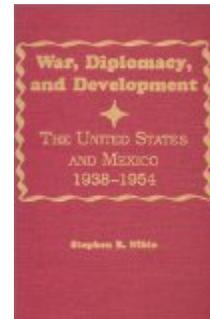
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stephen R. Niblo. *War, Diplomacy and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1995. xx + 320 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2550-8.

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*War, Diplomacy, and Development* explores the origins and process of Mexico's immediate post-World War II program of industrial expansion as it was related to the larger question of diplomatic, military, and economic relations between Mexico and the United States during the presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas, Manuel Avila Camacho, and Miguel Alemán. Its nine numbered chapters are divided chronologically into three main sections. Part One begins on the eve of World War II, in the years 1938 to 1940, a period that can be characterized not only as the highwater mark of the Cardenas regime's support for a program of radical populism and economic nationalism, but also justly (and ironically) as the beginning of a new era of accommodation and understanding in U.S. and Mexican relations. Part Two encompasses the war years, 1941 to 1945, when Avila Camacho, following precedents already well-established by Cardenas, committed Mexico unconditionally to the Allied cause. These decisions, politically-imposed from above by Cardenas and Avila Camacho, had far reaching and, according to Niblo, mostly harmful effects on the political, social, and economic evolution of the Mexican nation in the second half of the twentieth century. Part Three is devoted to the immediate post-war years, 1946 to 1954, as the cooperative relations that had begun during the war years were reflected in new policies and priorities for industrial modernization in peacetime that helped encourage a massive influx of foreign investment into Mexico on a scale unprecedented since the end of Porfirian era. By 1954 and afterwards, the radical populism and nationalism of the Cardenas years had been fully displaced by the pro-business activism of presidents like Miguel Alemán and his successors who have continued to rule Mexico through the official party, the Partido Institucional

Revolucionario—the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI). Encapsulated by a separate, brief, and unnumbered introduction and a conclusion, the nine numbered chapters, organized topically, deal respectively with Mexican and North American notions of Progress and Industrialization, with “Good Neighbor” diplomacy and the Cardenas regime in the immediate aftermath of the petroleum industry expropriations of 1938, with Mexico's entry into World War II, with the politics of wartime cooperation, with the impact of the war at home in Mexico, with post-war strategies of industrialization, with battles over foreign investment, with the political nature of industrialization, and with Mexico's new place in a postwar world system dominated by the United States.

Niblo's interests are focused on that brief historical interlude when the interests and instrumentalities of diplomacy, war, and developmentalism combined in unique, unforeseeable, and even unintended ways to deflect Mexico's economic and political trajectory away from the social and economic radicalism that had first surfaced during the Mexican Revolution and that seemed dominant, at least momentarily, during the Cardenas era. The coming of war helped the Cardenas regime survive potential foreign intervention in reaction to the oil expropriations, but paradoxically enabled Cardenas's successor, Avila Camacho, to use an appeal for wartime “sacrifice and patriotism” to strengthen his political standing and to impose otherwise unpopular and politically unfeasible policies that sharply increased incomes for Mexico's political and economic elites while further impoverishing and marginalizing the poorer majority. Ushering in a new era of intimate communication and collaboration between North American and Mexican business and political elites once unimaginable in aftermath of the Mexican

Revolution, World War II, and the shrewd diplomacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his representatives in Mexico such as George Messersmith, enabled the United States to regain the political and economic influence lost in the early Cardenas years, 1934 to 1938. Abandoning the revolutionary goal of advancing social justice by alleviating poverty for the Mexican masses and, instead, harnessing the power of the Mexican state to serve the interests of domestic and foreign developers in the private sector in order to pursue the new panacea of increased industrial production, the model of industrial development imposed by Avila Camacho and Aleman “inverted the populism of the 1930s and dropped the nationalist model of industrial development.”

Overall, *War, Diplomacy, and Development* is uneven in terms of its treatment of its theme and in the quality of its argument. The introduction and conclusion are all too brief. Chapter One (“Progress and Industrialization”) fails to provide an adequate historical perspective and context for understanding Mexico’s longer historical experience with abortive programs of economic development and industrialization. In what is otherwise an exceptionally interesting and useful Chapter Eight (“The Political Nature of Industrialization”), Niblo missed a valuable opportunity to link the survival of politicized economies in nineteenth-century Mexico with the explosive growth of politically-driven economies in wartime and postwar Mexico in the twentieth century.

More generally, Niblo uses his study of industrialization and diplomacy in Mexico during the World War II era to illustrate how the United States employed subtle and indirect methods to impose its scheme of development on less powerful societies and economies. These “New technologies of influence and control” helped the United States to consolidate and maintain an “informal empire” previously constructed around a more forceful and visible (and so more resistible) network of imperial relations. The author may well be right in his contention that Mexico’s present sad condition and deepening poverty in the 1990s is the product of an unwise and unfortunate industrial development scheme that evolved during and immediately after World War II, but, devoid as it is of statistical evidence or a verifiable methodology, his argument is far from convincing. That is, counter-factually, is it plausible that Mexico would be richer and more prosperous today had it stayed true to a revolutionary heritage based on radical populism and economic nationalism. And with a finite, exhausted, and over-exploited natural resource base to support a population likely to exceed 100 million in the first decade of the twenty-first century, would

a Mexican state more friendly and supportive to subsistence agriculture and more hostile to domestic or foreign capitalists ensure an improved quality of life for the people who do inhabit Mexico’s countryside and cities?

Is a traditional-style, narrative diplomatic history an adequate vehicle for answering the very significant questions that Niblo raises in *War, Diplomacy, and Development*? As in most works of this genre, its author relies heavily upon episodic, anecdotal evidence, and eschews the more orthodox and more rigorous theory and methods typical of works set in mainstream economic history. For a study of industrial modernization, *War, Diplomacy, and Development* is devoid of a statistical data or econometric analysis of the sort needed to assess empirically the question of how much Mexico materially gained or lost in its pursuit of industrial progress during and immediately after World War II. Noteworthy for its use of a wide variety of public and private archives in the United States, Mexico, and Great Britain, Niblo’s study relies too heavily upon U.S. State Department correspondence housed in the U.S. National Archives’ Record Group 59. In that sense this book is not so much a study of war, diplomacy, and industrialization in Mexico as it is a study of what U.S. pundits and policy makers believed or wanted to believe about the war, diplomacy, and Mexico’s developmental policies. Niblo’s primary source materials on the Mexican side do not match those to be found on the U.S. side in terms of either the quality or quantity of the author’s own citations. This imbalance is inadvertently aggravated by Niblo’s decision to separate diplomatic history materials used in *War, Diplomacy, and Development* from other primary source materials more relevant to domestic Mexican politics and industrialization that the author intends to publish later in a separate volume. Without these kinds of source materials and without a fuller exploration of the domestic political environment, it will be difficult for most readers to make informed judgements weighing the role of the United States and its developmental instrumentalities in shaping (or deforming) Mexican economic and political policy-making in this era.

Even with these defects, *War, Diplomacy, and Development* is useful reading for a broad audience that includes undergraduate and graduate students of Mexican and U.S. diplomatic history as well as scholars with interests ranging from Mexican development to larger questions related to systems of global economic and political dependency and inter-dependency. Apart from being one of the first North American historians to demonstrate the singular historical significance of a global event like

World War II for shaping Mexico's historical experience in the twentieth century, Niblo has produced with *War, Diplomacy, and Development* a durable, specialized diplomatic history of the era, 1938 to 1954, and he offers to readers many useful and provocative insights and speculations into the origins of Mexico's more recent economic and political crises in the 1980s and 1990s. Apart from its essential contributions to the historiography of Mexico, this work is bound to increase a fruitful debate and dialogue among all participants in and observers of the processes and politics of modernization.

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