



**John J. Dwyer, “Diplomatic Weapons of the Weak: Mexican Policy-Making during the U.S.-Mexican Agrarian Dispute, 1934-1941,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 26, Issue 3 (Summer 2002): 375-395.**

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John J. Dwyer’s commendable study about the controversy over the Lázaro Cárdenas agrarian reform program and the debt owed to American farmers and agribusiness provides significant insight into U.S.-Mexican relations during the 1930s and 1940s. According to Dwyer, the final “global settlement” between the two nations secured a favorable solution to the agrarian issue for the Mexican government, and resolved many bilateral controversies that led to a positive new era of friendship and cooperation between the North American neighbors. This article successfully follows a recent trend of scholarship that applies subaltern politics to the study of U.S. foreign relations and, when coupled with both U.S. and Mexican archival sources, provides a significant contribution to the field of diplomatic history.

Dwyer’s key premise is that Mexican policy-makers successfully used “evasive tactics, such as foot-dragging, deception and noncompliance” to secure a favorable resolution to the controversy created by the Cárdenas land redistribution program, which in 1948 ultimately paid \$19 million to satisfy American claims that initially demanded \$102 million. At the outset, the U.S. government demanded full compensation for its landowners. For Mexico, any solution had to include an aid package capable of allowing it to pay the expropriation debt (although in a much smaller amount than initially demanded), and that would help stabilize its deteriorating economy.

This article is especially impressive when juxtaposed with the numerous studies surrounding the nationalization of the oil industry. Unlike the oil crisis, which is centered on one episode dated March 18, 1938, expropriation of private property was a constantly evolving process that continued over the entire six-year administration of Cárdenas. Another equally significant assessment is Dwyer’s claim that a harsher and immediate response by U.S. officials could have prevented the Mexican oil industry’s nationalization. Although I do not believe direct military action was an option for the Roosevelt administration, a quicker and more organized response, in 1935 or 1936, concerning the agrarian crisis could have given it more options in dealing with the oil expropriation. For example, affairs in Europe would not have been as significant, and consequently U.S. officials could have had more options and time in which to react to Mexican seizures of property.

The article straightforwardly challenges the stereotypical premise that within U.S./Latin American relations the United States is all powerful and a Latin American nation, in this case Mexico, is unable to withstand pressure from its northern neighbor because of its

weak and vulnerable position. According to Dwyer, “[h]istorians have obscured the fact that the agrarian and oil conflicts ended favorably for Mexico in part because Cardenista officials outmaneuvered the Roosevelt administration.” The Mexican strategy was complex, multi-fold and at times misrepresented itself, although certainly not unique. Mexican officials continued to seize American owned property and ignored their own promises of compensation. Simultaneously, they continued to court U.S. policy-makers to lobby on their behalf for international loans and increased exports of Mexican raw materials such as silver. The U.S. response to Mexico’s strategy was encumbered by the many voices involved in assessing Mexican affairs in formulating a response to Mexico’s demands for financial support and its claims of helplessness.

I concur with Dwyer that the Cárdenas administration could not, even if it had wanted to, accede to U.S. demands for reparations and for making domestic reforms subject to foreign influence because of the political risks within Mexico. However, this point was not necessarily a disadvantage for Mexican policy-makers because it allowed for a time-honored tactic in their favor. By publicly attacking U.S. officials as being imperialistic and trying to thwart the goals of the Mexican Revolution, Cárdenas could at least partially blame the United States for Mexico’s current economic problems and strengthen his position against anti-Cardenista movements. Any open U.S. aggression could have also lead, although highly unlikely, to the type of response that President Woodrow Wilson experienced when he miscalculated and invaded Vera Cruz. The unified protests not only caught the United States off guard in 1914 but also set a pattern that Mexican presidents since Venustiano Carranza have used successfully when caught between Mexican public opinion and honoring its international responsibilities. The strategy is one in which a Mexican president publicly criticizes the United States, but which secretly or through indirect channels seeks a feasible solution for both governments.

Another factor that could have been developed more relates to when the agrarian and oil expropriation question actually began to threaten U.S. interests. I understand that this a journal article and not a monograph dedicated to this topic, but nonetheless, more attention paid to the roots of the agrarian question could shed additional understanding onto the policy goals and limitations available to each government. After all, neither president inherited this crisis; not even Cárdenas who Mexican historiography gives so much credit to for fully implementing the goals of the Mexican Revolution through his interpretation of the Constitution of 1917. Mexican agrarian reform grew with each successive Mexican administration after 1917 and accelerated during the Herbert Hoover administration corresponding with the Emilio Portes Gil and Pascual Ortiz Rubio four-year period (1929-1933). Consequently, understanding where the United States stood on the eve of the Roosevelt and Cárdenas administrations could help us better understand the factors that necessitated the final “global solution” in November 1941.

These are all just minor quibbles in comparison to this impressive undertaking by Professor Dwyer. I am encouraged by his efforts to seek out relevant Mexican sources because after spending this past summer working on my own research in Mexico City, I understand the complexities and patience needed for such labor. I hope scholars of U.S. diplomatic history will continue to strive not only to complete more work in foreign

archives, but also continue embracing different theories from other historical fields and regions in order to continue producing the well-informed and well-researched scholarship, as is usually the case with the diplomatic historical field. Certainly, multi-national archival research is not a new phenomenon by any means, but certainly we can all strive to make it the standard rather than the exception.

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