
The French Intervention in Mexico

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The role of the United States on the global stage has been a subject of study and debate for many years. America's dominant role in today's world is now generally agreed upon, but what about its entrance into this global arena? When did this debut actually occur? Since there has been no official certificatory body to award a global power designation, the occasion that saw America's emergence as a world power is up for debate. Although obscured by high-profile world wars, regional wars, and perhaps other incidents, it was America's response to a direct threat of its Monroe Doctrine, that in the form of the French intervention in Mexico, which marks America's first significant entry into the global power community. Its effect on the Second French Empire would ripple throughout the world wherever France established her interests and ultimately alter the forthcoming regime change in France. America's action also had a hand in reversing a new wave of colonization that was beginning in Mexico; this too had an effect on global relations that could have grown between Mexico and other nations around the world.

Many have considered America's entrance into the First World War as her first global power emergence. Richard Worth, an author of high school level textbooks, expressed this generally accepted view, which sums up the common belief that "through its participation in World War I, the United States became an important international world power."¹ Such a statement made to youthful readers, who will perhaps never approach the subject again, underscores the widespread acceptance of this view. Such a view does have its merits. American troops, and their impressive support network, started to arrive in France just in time to prop up their wavering allies, and then took the battle to Imperial Germany's armies. After the war and President Wilson's retreat from the Paris Peace Conference, the United States opted for a more isolationist foreign policy.² The Senate's refusal to ratify the Versailles Treaty, and thereby join the League of Nations, only left American finance as its significant force in the global world. While the view of the First World War's importance to the history of global power is unquestioned, it was decades removed from America's maiden entry into

the ranks of global powers.

The end of the nineteenth century saw another episode that historians can cite as America's entry into a more global status. The 1898 conflict most commonly referred to as the "Spanish-American War" was such an episode. The United States projected its military power to the nearby island of Cuba and the far-off archipelago of the Philippines. Its chief result: a colonial acquisition of the Philippines, after putting down a spirited native insurgency, and additional islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean, had a far longer lasting legacy for the United States than the toothless treaties ending the First World War or establishing the League of Nations that America would never join.

Some believed the 1898 war with Spain was the catalyst that ushered America into the ranks of global power states. In the decade after that war's end, Harvard University professor of history, Archibald Coolidge, summarized the result of the war: "It was evident that they [the United States] had assumed a new position among nations; that henceforth they would have to be counted with as one of the chief forces in international affairs."³ The 1898 war, and the Philippines' rebellion against an American change in ownership, tied America to a global wheel that would turn to further issues. The importance of that epoch continues to be recognized by historians today. David Haglund also agrees with the view that in the time of Teddy Roosevelt's ascendancy, America entered the world stage as a "world power, but had not yet emerged as a 'superpower.'"⁴ Perhaps the degree of power America wielded during that epoch might be a matter of debate, but the fact that America had arrived onto the world stage at that time is less debatable. An assessment within the last decade by Neil Smith has a similar evaluation of the 1898 war and subsequent successful conquests undertaken by the United States: "the Spanish American War . . . also marks the cusp of a radically different globalism. The symbolic dawn of the American Century"⁵ was underway with the aggressive action of the United States; an action that was noticeably quick through the agency of an attack against Spain, a global power in decline.⁶

Among many historians, it seems agreed that the 1898 war and its aftermath marks the beginning of an era, an "American Century" as some would call it. Was there yet another time, previous to even the Spanish War, that saw America wielding power with a global force? Had that bold Yankee assertion already inserted itself unto the world stage some time before?

The declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 changed the way that

America would deal with its neighbors and the great powers across the Atlantic. Alfred Bushnell Hart points to the idea of doctrine's global significance in regards to American policy. "The Monroe doctrine was founded on the idea of a territorial division of the world into two separate hemispheres."⁷ The globe was thus divided into two views and two American foreign policies. The United States would no longer, in principle at least, limit herself to responding to direct attacks upon her soil or citizenry, as in 1812. The adolescent nation was beginning to demand more attention from its more mature forebears.

After America proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, whatever a European nation did to alter the governance of any American nation, be it Mexico or Honduras, and later even South America, would be a concern of the United States.⁸ Isolationist tendencies, always strong in America, still would not overrule this issue. The Atlantic Ocean provided a buffer against the Old World, but not so for concerns emanating from the Americas. If the European powers that had reached around the globe wished to change the existing order in the New World, the United States would have to emerge from its continental fortress and engage such a world power, thereby globalizing American potential after 1823.

The evolution of the doctrine's idea into an actual force affecting the global balance of power would come into being in 1865. The American Civil War, that bloody four-year-long cataclysm, would provide the impetus for a European monarch, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte of France, known to history as Napoleon III, nephew of the great Napoleon Bonaparte, to openly flaunt the Monroe Doctrine. At that time, the risk of war with the United States was not likely, as these same states were greatly pre-occupied in a war with each other. If the United States ceased to exist, there would be an opportunity to fill in the vacuum of power and influence it had left, but which nation would be bold enough to grasp it?

Napoleon III's desire to compete with the United Kingdom for economic and imperial ascendancy enticed him into an adventure in the New World.⁹ Those in the French press, such as Alphonse de Lamartine, argued the emperor's goal was "to obtain, not for France alone, but for Europe at large, a foothold upon the American continent."¹⁰ The concerns of several countries complicated the entire Mexican affair, though France would shoulder the greatest burden, and subsequent consequences. The catalyst for setting this "new Napoleonic Vision"¹¹ into motion was the status of the United States. After Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter, the adolescent American power had suddenly turned upon itself. The consequences

of such changes were tremendous—along with the rewards for those bold enough, or desperate enough, to step into the power vacuum. If the United States disintegrated, a major world power such as France would have a literally golden opportunity to tap into the immense wealth of the Americas, a wealth that had only recently been wrenched free from European imperial control.

A captain of the French officer corps, the comte Émile de Kératry, who would participate in the Mexican adventure, wrote about the reasons the French believed they went to Mexico in the first place—and the United States was at the heart of this reasoning. “It was the apparent dissolution of the United States which has been at the origin of the Mexican venture, just as their resurrection was sufficient to annihilate this ephemeral throne.”¹² As the Civil War grew fiercer and more prolonged, the seemingly imminent collapse of the United States drew a global power player into the periphery of the borderlands and conflict, waiting for the right time to strike.

During this crucial time in the mid-nineteenth century, a sudden disruption of American cotton exports coincided with the explosion of textile manufacturing, and in itself signaled heightened American influence on the global stage. England knew this time as the “Cotton Famine,” and the Union blockade of Southern cotton exports during the Civil War years severely crippled Britain’s great textile industry.¹³ Britain and others scrambled to increase cotton production in areas such as India and Egypt. The United States caused this global disturbance, which was an unintended consequence of a military policy designed to win a domestic war. However, Louis Napoleon’s flaunting of the Monroe Doctrine during and after the same war warranted direct action by the United States. The consequences of this action would set the Second French Empire on a downward slide that would culminate in its overthrow in 1871, resulting in Napoleon III’s capture by the Prussians and the establishment of the Third French Republic. Not only was the Second French Empire damaged by America’s threatened use of force but Americans forced Europeans and others who flocked to Mexico to leave, and in doing so, severed the establishment of potential global connections.

By threatening France, a global power, the United States altered the global balance of power. The Second French Empire, having been thrown off guard in Mexico, was not fully able to meet the threat from Prussia’s Bismarck that soon crippled French interest on the continent vis-à-vis Prussia’s attacks on Denmark and then Austria herself.¹⁴ A still unprepared France fell to Prussia just a

few years following the French pullout from Mexico and America had a hand in that result. The *honneur* of the French Army had suffered; a flagging morale would follow. Hazen comments on the Mexican Affair that: “It had damaged him [Louis Napoleon] morally before Europe [and elsewhere] by the desertion of his protégés to an appalling fate before the threats of the United States.”¹⁵ The damage to Napoleon III’s prestige revealed cracks in the armor of the French behemoth that the likes of Bismarck would exploit. The world had seen how the threats from the United States had forced the mighty Second French Empire to back down.

Napoleon III thought he could rectify his sagging fortunes by saber-rattling against the Prussians, but Bismarck was ready for any and all of his actions. The Prussian chancellor engineered events that would culminate in the Franco-Prussian War.¹⁶ That would be the last war that Napoleon III would fight, and its result would not be the same as his namesake had achieved at Jena decades before. Prussia defeated France, and Napoleon became a prisoner who would then die in exile a few years later. The Second French Empire simply would not survive.¹⁷ France was not excluded from further global power however, for it reinvented its imperial vision under its new government, the Third Republic. From that time forward there would be no French monarch, Bonaparte or otherwise, to command the homeland or its far-flung colonies. In place of royalist adventurers, there came efficient republican bureaucrats who had more success than that experienced by any of Louis-Napoleon’s administrators. How did events in Mexico become so important for the United States, France, and the world at large? During the early years of the American Civil War, the great European powers, France, Great Britain, and Spain, landed troops in Mexico, as had happened before, thanks to the anarchy that had gripped this unhappy nation for the previous forty years.¹⁸ Although they claimed to have taken this action of forcing Mexico to resume the debt payments to the European nations it had defaulted on, it in fact turned out to be a scheme of the French emperor to establish a new monarchy in Mexico. This was to be a power base that would expand European influence in the Americas in direct opposition to the Monroe Doctrine. Kératry sums up well what was in Napoleon III’s mind at the beginning of the Mexican adventure:

Since the United States already appeared non-existent, since the coast was clear in the New World, why not attempt something big, which although not useless to the French interest, would certainly *enhance the prestige so needed by its government* [emphasis added]. They had, against Mexico; endless grievances...why not go with weapons in hand to demand

reparation of those grievances, like it had been done several times already? But this time, we could not appear on these distant coasts and leave with a treaty, nor could we just occupy a port and receive the necessary indemnities. This time our arrival should signal the start of a revolution. . . This revolution, which [conservative Mexican] immigrants full of confidence thought would be certain and easy, was supposed to overthrow the republic and result in the foundation of a throne with our support.¹⁹

When the British and Spanish realized Napoleon III had plans beyond a demand for reparations, they recalled their troops. The French stayed on, and sent more troops.

While the French and their allies were busy conquering Mexico, in 1864, Mexican exiles in France and Napoleon III invited Maximilian von Hapsburg, the brother of the Emperor of Austria, to come and be emperor of Mexico, which his troops already occupied.²⁰

The Austrian prince was to secure a new power base, a Latin power base that a Hapsburg could

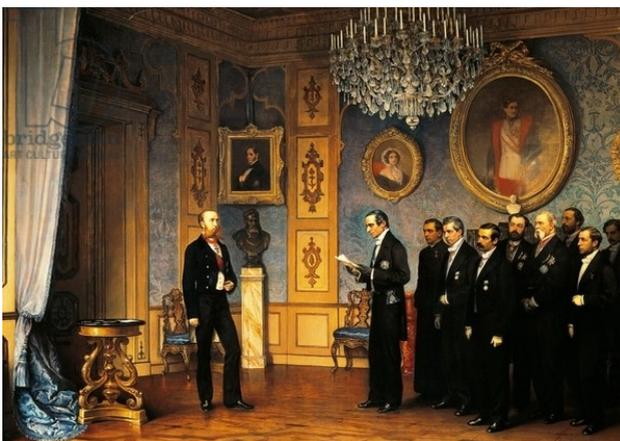


Figure 1. The Mexican Delegation Offering the Mexican Imperial Crown to Maximilian of Hapsburg. Painting by Cesare dell'Acqua, 1863.

still accomplish. Anglo-America would have a Franco-Latin counterbalance—and that from a Germanic monarch in the Western Hemisphere. But the growth in the global relations that could have been fostered fell away as their French protectors turned away in the face of American hostility.

When a delegation of exiled Mexican conservatives came to Austria to offer the Hapsburg prince a crown as their emperor, they augmented the offer with a certain promise. The French emperor promised additional troops, on top of the few Austrian and Belgian troops already contracted to the cause. Also adding impetus was a flimsy plebiscite that only polled those conservative Mexicans most likely to agree; it stated Maximilian was to rule the will of the Mexican people. This finally convinced the young prince and his consort, Charlotte, to board a ship for the

Mexican port city of Veracruz. From there, they began the march that would end in the president's palace in Mexico City.²¹

By 1865, the Europeans and their allies had overrun almost all of Mexico. They forced Benito Juárez, the legally-elected president of Mexico, to flee to Mexico's northern border to conduct a guerilla war. It seemed as if Napoleon III's scheme would come to fruition until the American Civil War ended with a victory for the Union forces. From then on in Mexico, the tables started to turn. The Mexican Republican forces started receiving American aid, including many surplus Civil War weapons, veteran fighters, and non-material aid that propped up the republican cause.²²

America's covert and overt actions countered European efforts in Mexico, and the fact that Napoleon attempted to erect a European-led monarchy on the ruins of the Mexican republic, called for a bold American stroke to defend the Monroe Doctrine. What made this action so daring was that American leaders, so soon after the bloodiest conflict in the country's history, had the fortitude to risk a war with a major world power to enforce a doctrine that some argued to be insignificant on the domestic scene.

As the imperialists realized that few in their country were going to embrace the usurpation of the elected Mexican government by foreigners and their armies, the need arose for more European troops to arrive and firmly establish the Second Mexican Empire by force. In total, France sent more than 38,000 French troops, representing twenty percent of Napoleon III's armed forces, to Mexico. This, however, was not a strictly French affair. The Khedive of Egypt sent some 450 Sudanese soldiers. Austria sent approximately 7,000 troops, while Belgium added about 2,000 volunteers known as "*le régiment Impératrice Charlotte*."²³ Maximilian's consort was Belgian, and he formed the Belgian volunteer regiment in her name. Since these troops received pay for their service, they more properly might have been called mercenaries. Whatever their label, they were part of an international force with a common enemy: the Mexican Republican forces, regular and guerilla, under Juárez.

Thus the United States threatened to go to war against a global coalition, but its greatest pressure selectively targeted the French. America directed her full diplomatic and military weight against the French forces; since without French soldiers, the remaining soldiers of the other nationalities would evacuate without reinforcements. When Napoleon decided at last to call his troops home in stages, he

did try to arrange for additional Austrian troops to fill their void. America immediately threatened Austria with war. Austria backed down.²⁴ Vienna had a growing concern that Berlin would target them next, even though they had been allied against Denmark not long before. Berlin's aggression would soon yield devastating results to Austria's once-great continental power.

As expected, all the other troops, along with many colonists Maximilian had invited, fled Mexico when the French regiments, there protecting them, started to leave.²⁵ Mexicans sympathetic to Juárez, increasingly the majority of the country, would make little distinctions in nationalities when carrying out reprisals against those they saw in their country to aid a foreign power poised against them.

By the start of 1867, those who had come to Mexico to prop up or benefit from the imperial throne began to desert that same throne—the emperor of the French would be no exception. The nineteenth century English historian, W. H. Adams, notes that the desertion of Maximilian by Louis Napoleon in the face of American pressure “must ever remain a dark stain on the history of the second French empire.”²⁶ Because of this, Maximilian would pay with his life, while Napoleon would eventually pay with his throne. These events started when America decided to get involved with the current affairs of Mexico.

The French emperor's desire to regain lost prestige would tempt him into war with Prussia in hopes that his subjects would rally around him in the time of war. The emperor was in need of a new, revamped image—what better way than to lead his nation into action against upstart Prussia in order to gain the “revenge for Sadowa” his subjects were clamoring for? Since “both the military and political prestige of Napoleon III were dimmed by the melancholy issue of the Mexican expedition”²⁷ there needed to be a war to return the glory to the throne that was sliding into jeopardy. There must have been a question in the minds of his subordinates: if Louis-Napoleon would leave a Hapsburg, the brother of the Emperor of Austria, in the lurch, how faithful would he be to anyone else he had need of that was perhaps less nobly born?

The enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine upon a global power, the Second Empire of France, compromised the power and legacy of the first Napoleon's greatness to a point of inaugurating the decline of France's domination of the European continent in the face of Prussia. Prussia, the unifier of Germany, would, in a few years, be celebrating the beginning of the Second German Reich in the halls of Versailles itself. Napoleon III's scheme at re-legitimization had backfired

with the most disastrous of results.

The response to the French intervention was an important moment in the foreign policy history of the United States. American government leaders stood on principle when the nation could hardly afford to do so. It was a bold, decisive, and ultimately successful act remarkable when compared to the more common escalation's resultant bloodshed. Historians should study this incident more often and in more detail to instruct those today who may find themselves in a similar situation—having to choose between costly principle and easy expediency. It also deserves further investigation to understand more deeply how America's newly-aggressive posture affected the decisions of other nations, either militarily or economically.

America might have had only regional intentions when it started its saber-rattling, but its action against France had global repercussions. There was more than a military intervention taking place in Mexico at that time, a new wave of colonists, including Confederate soldiers and political leaders, had been arriving and settling in Mexico since before the end of the Civil War. As part of his perceived duties to promote the settlement of lands that earlier strife had depopulated, "Maximilian had made extensive land grants to German, French, and Austrian immigrants."²⁸ He had to divert imperial troops to protect these settlers. Those Mexicans not in Maximilian's camp viewed these settlers the same as the foreign soldiers that had come to force an unwanted throne upon them. When Napoleon III bowed to American pressure and started to recall his troops, these new settlers found it wise to leave the country before they would have to pay for the land they had been granted with their lives.²⁹ The native Mexicans who would take their lands back from these new settlers would not establish international connections, they only wanted to take back that which had been torn from them.

The displaced settlers, fresh from Europe and elsewhere, would have naturally established such connections for economic and other reasons, but this was not to be. The actions of the United States limited Mexico's development in what could have been a more varied global presence as a new round of immigrants, wealthier than the average pioneer farmer, were driven out of Mexico. The re-possessors of their land, who by in large were indigenous Indians, of course had no global contacts.³⁰ This was an unintended consequence of enforcing the Monroe Doctrine. There would be no new wave of immigration to

Mexico, thanks to American threats of military action and surplus American firearms that were increasingly finding their way into the hands of Mexican Juarista fighters.

The wars of the United States have often been the mileposts used by historians to divide its history. Anyone familiar with the history of the United States will at once know the general time frame being examined by its relation to a past or future war; the “ante-bellum” term is very familiar example to describe the years preceding the Civil War, along with the “interwar years” of the twentieth century. The Mexican affair was different; Americans did not experience any additional bloodshed so close on the heels of the Civil War. There were no banner headlines proclaiming its events, no returning troops to receive a hero’s welcome as they would have marched down Pennsylvania Avenue. This affair was a success without the body counts, which has not attracted a great amount of re-examination.

America’s response to European troops on its southern border may appear strictly regional to some, yet an examination of the events that occurred during this time will show that there were global consequences the original protagonists involved never dreamed of. From altered relations to the Holy See, which was never able to reclaim lands in Mexico confiscated from the Church, to the rolling back of European immigration and settlers who had come with Maximilian’s blessing, the consequences were significant. The absence of actual hostilities and memorable battles perhaps has ensured that America’s response to the French intervention in Mexico is little appreciated by those who study American or global history. Regardless, this was not only a crucial time in America’s history, it would have impacts of global importance as the Monroe Doctrine was revived and strengthened, while at the same time the prestige of an emperor who ruled over a global empire was so damaged that soon its effects would remove him from the world’s stage. Two empires, Mexican and French, fell and were permanently replaced by two republics. America had a hand in this and more.

Notes

1. Richard Worth, *America in World War I* (New York: World Almanac Library, 2007), 6.

2. Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 16, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10315953&p00=%22american%20isolationism%22> (accessed July 2, 2011).

3. Archibald Cary Coolidge, *The United States as a World Power* (New York: MacMillan & Co., 1908), 132.

4. David G. Haglund, "Devant L'Empire: France and the Question of 'American Empire,' from Theodore Roosevelt to George W. Bush," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19, no.4 (December 2008): 749, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2011).

5. Neil Smith, *American Empire : Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 60, [http:// site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10062315&p00= %22american%20empire%22](http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10062315&p00=%22american%20empire%22) (accessed July 21, 2011).

6. Scott Miller, *The President and the Assassin: McKinley, Terror, and Empire at the Dawn of the American Century* (New York: Random House, 2011), 216.

7. Alfred Bushnell Hart, *The Monroe Doctrine: an Interpretation* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1916), 70.

8. *Ibid.*, 75.

9. Sarah York Stevenson, *Maximilian in Mexico: a Woman's Reminiscences of the French Intervention in Mexico* (New York: Century Company, 1899), 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 7.

12. Emile de Kératry, *L'Élévation et la chute de l'empereur Maximilien: Histoire de L'intervention française au Mexique, 1861-1867*, trans. by Christine Gokey (Leipzig: Dunker et Humblot, 1867), x.

13. Brian Schoen, *Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 267.

14. Charles Downer Hazen, *Modern European History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1917), 353.

15. *Ibid.*, 354.

16. *Ibid.*, 356.

17. *Ibid.*, 358.

18. Stevenson, *Maximilian in Mexico*, 11.

19. Kératry, *L'Élévation et la chute de l'empereur Maximilien*, xi.

20. Stevenson, 4.

21. Stevenson, *Maximilian in Mexico*, 3-7.

22. William E. Hardy, "South of the Border: Ulysses S. Grant and the French Intervention," *Civil War History* 54, no. 1 (March 2008): 64-67, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 6, 2011).

23. “Expédition du Mexique 1861-1867,” *Histoire du Monde.net*, http://www.histoiredumonde.net/article.php3?id_article=1201 (accessed July 6, 2011).

24. Stephen J. Valone, “‘Weakness Offers Temptation’: William H. Seward and the Reassertion of the Monroe Doctrine,” *Diplomatic History* 4, no. 19 (Fall 1995), <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed July 14, 2011).

25. Stevenson, *Maximilian In Mexico*, 256.

26. Adams, W. H. Davenport, *Franco-Prussian War: Its Causes, Incidents, and Consequences*, ed. H. M. Hozier (London: W. Mackenzie, 1872), <http://www.archive.org/stream/francoprussianwa00hozi#page/n7/mode/2up> (accessed July 3, 2011).

27. *Ibid.*, 161.

28. Andrew F. Rolle, *The Lost Cause: the Confederate Exodus to Mexico* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 24.

29. Stevenson, 254.

30. Rolle, *The Lost Cause*, 110.

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