

BENITO JUAREZ

Written by Herbert W. Piekow

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—The Man Who Appointed Himself President

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Benito Juárez was born March 21, 1806 a full-blooded Zapotec Indian from San Pablo Gueletao, where his parents had a small farm. At the age of thirteen he was sent to Oaxaca City to the house of the Maza family. His sister worked as a servant for Señor Maza. Juárez could neither read, write nor speak Spanish. Señor Maza, however, realized Juárez was a bright young man and hired Antonio Salanueva, a devout Catholic and lay member of the Franciscan order, to teach the boy reading, writing, arithmetic, Spanish grammar and bookbinding. Both men were impressed with Juárez's aptitude and they sent him to the Franciscan seminary in Oaxaca.

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After graduating from the seminary in 1827, he enrolled in the institute of Science and Art and in 1834 earned a law degree from that institution. While studying for his degree he served as a Oaxacan city councilman and in 1841 he became a civil judge. In 1843 he married Margarita Maza, the daughter of his patron.

His career continued to escalate as he was appointed a federal deputy and served as governor of Oaxaca from 1847 to 1852. After his term as governor he became director of his alma mater, the Institute of Science and Art. When the dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna regained power in 1853 Juárez was expelled from Mexico. In October of that year he arrived in New Orleans where he joined the liberation movement that drove Santa Anna into exile in the fall of 1854. In November President Alvarez appointed Juárez minister of the interior and in December of 1854 he was elevated to chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Three years later in December, 1857 Félix Zuloaga led a coup in which Congress was dissolved and on January 11, 1858 Benito Juárez, as chief justice, appointed himself President of Mexico, a legal procedure as the chief justice is next in line to succeed the President and President Comonfort had resigned. The difficulty was that Juárez had few supporters, no congress and fewer finances and Mexico now had two Presidents as Félix Zuloaga had also declared himself President. What followed was the bloody fratricidal Reform War of 1858-61, pitting liberals against conservatives.

Zuloaga's forces captured Juárez, near Guadalajara's Palace of Justice and he was saved from a firing squad only through the intervention of the poet Guillermo Prieto, who thrust himself in front of Juárez, crying: "Brave men do not assassinate." The soldiers allowed Juárez to escape. By sheer determination and a feeling that he was somewhat like his idol, Abraham Lincoln, the short and stocky Indian named Benito Juárez persisted in his efforts to form a legitimate and well run Mexican government independent of fratricide and European intervention. It is curious however, that he appealed to the United States for assistance, which he thought was most likely to come to his aid.

In fact Union General Phil Sheridan wrote in his journal that "we continued supplying arms and munitions . . . sending as many as 30,000 muskets from Baton Rouge alone." And from General Grant, which is assumed to have come from Lincoln: "Concentrate in all available points in the States an army strong enough to move against the invaders of Mexico." The US assisted Juárez, not so much because they believed in him, but feared the foreign powers of France and Austria who were now in Mexico with Maximilian as the Emperor of Mexico.

After the death of Emperor Maximilian Juárez easily won the 1867 election; but he faced serious problems. Two long and devastating wars had left an empty treasury and a large army remained as well as European resentment over the execution of Maximilian. To raise money for his bankrupt country Juárez sold off lands that had been expropriated from the Church. He sold these lands to hacendados (big land owners) who had supported the Liberal cause. Land stripped from the Church, instead of being distributed to the campesinos (peasant farmers), was sold to the highest bidder. The displaced soldiers for the reduced army presented another problem; many became bandits operating on the outskirts of Guadalajara. and the road from Veracruz to Mexico City was unsafe for passengers or cargo.

Being President of a bankrupt Mexico was not an easy job. The country was further pulled apart by several insurrections in central Mexico and Juárez had to send in troops to subdue challenges by the rebels whose message was, "To destroy the present vicious state of exploitation." In the south there were insurgent Maya and in the north large bands of marauding Apache, who it is estimated caused the death of over 15,000 Mexicans.

Throughout his entire time as President of Mexico Juárez was faced with opposition, conflict, non-support and attempted coups and civil wars. Juárez faced an almost impossible situation and for five years he worked at being President of Mexico until on July 17, 1872 his heart gave out while he was working at his desk in the National Palace.

Juárez, however, had many accomplishments. He is responsible for the present form of the Mexican Federal Government with two houses; it was Juárez who created the Senate of the Chamber of Deputies in order to weaken Congress and to help strengthen the executive branch; he gave himself the right to veto any bill, with a two-thirds majority required to override the veto.

He wanted to be remembered like his contemporary Lincoln, however Juárez lacked the charisma and he was unable to gain the necessary support that allowed Lincoln to earn his status. Also, unlike Lincoln, who freed the slaves, Hidalgo had already proclaimed a no slavery policy for Mexico, although the peasants who worked the lands were in virtual servitude and it would take another revolution before they were truly liberated.

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