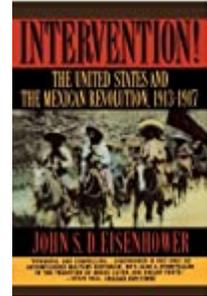




**John S. D. Eisenhower.** *Intervention! The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1917.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. xxi + 393 pp. \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-31318-5.



**Reviewed by** Martin Haas (History Department, Adelphi University)

**Published on** H-LatAm (February, 2003)

## Regime Change!

### Regime Change!

John Eisenhower's *Intervention! The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1917* exemplifies the virtues of narrative history, while, paradoxically, its successes accentuate the weakness of the methodology. Eisenhower tells the story of U.S. military incursions into Mexico in a clear, readable, even compelling style yet falls short of locating the facts within a diplomatic and ideological context. Detailed accounts of major battles and small portraits of the major Mexican revolutionaries, often with the elegance of a painted porcelain miniature, bring to life the Byzantine world of the Mexican revolution, but students and scholars learn little of the complex social and ideological struggles among the Mexican revolutionaries or the motivations and goals of the U.S. policies toward Mexico. Eisenhower states in his introduction that the importance of Mexican-American relations exceeds the scholarly attention devoted to the subject. While Eisenhower's judgment of historiographical relativity has some merit, his statement that "no other subject of comparable importance, in my opinion, has been so neglected and so misunderstood" borders on hyper-

bole. Many books and articles have explored Mexican-U.S. relations during the early twentieth century. Moreover, his arguments derive entirely from English sources and primarily from North American authors. None of the secondary sources, manuscripts, documents, newspapers, periodicals, or articles cited in the bibliography are in Spanish.

Eisenhower acknowledges his personal interest in this era of U.S.-Mexican relations. In a charming anecdote he relates that his father, Second Lieutenant Dwight D. Eisenhower, met his mother in early 1916 when the U.S. army was mobilized on the Mexican border. "Though my father was not sent into Mexico as a member of the Putative Expedition, the prospects of his immediate departure gave an excuse for an early wedding" (p. xvi). Whether in homage to his father, and/or his own military background, Eisenhower's descriptions of military operations and engagements demonstrate expertise, a passion for the subject, and a gift for battlefield narrative. Pancho Villa's campaigns in the North and Pershing's Punitive mission are carefully examined within military and geographical contexts. Specific battles, scummages, and

raids receive detailed attention (eight clearly drawn maps give invaluable aid in following the action). Not only does Eisenhower vividly recount military actions already well known to North American readers, such as the landing of U.S. troops in Vera Cruz and Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, Texas, but equal emphasis is given to Mexican military history such as the Battle of Celaya where General Alvaro Obregon's forces defeated Villa's army of the North. Eisenhower observes that in the largest land battle in North America since the Civil War, Obregon's knowledge and use of tactics developed in Europe during the First World War contributed to a decisive victory. From beginning to end, Eisenhower attempts to place events within the context of the Mexican revolution as well as their implications for Mexican politics and national identity. Throughout the book he presents vivid portraits of leading figures of the Mexican revolution and relates the interactions between the military and political leaders. More importantly, Eisenhower concentrates on the personalities and interactions of the great revolutionary leaders rather than on the goals which differentiate their policies.

Eisenhower's chapter on Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico, which precipitated Pershing's armed incursion, serves as a perfect illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of *Intervention!* "Villa Raids Columbus" offers a highly readable, even spirited, virtually minute-by-minute account of Villa's attack and the defense of the citizens complete with a map of the town showing the route of the Villistas. The reader learns in great detail the events of the day but the chapter lacks a sophisticated interpretative framework to understand Villa's decision to raid within the United States. Indeed, Eisenhower notes that "Columbus itself seemed to offer very little to tempt even a reckless leader to raid it" (p. 217).

Eisenhower contradicts himself, however, when he states that plunder was a key reason for the raid. He raises the possibility that, on a strategic level, "Villa hoped to cause a war between the United States and Mexico" (p. 227), but he avoids addressing broader political possibilities. One interpretation proffered by Friedrich Katz suggests that "the primary motivation was Villa's firm belief that Woodrow Wilson had concluded an agreement with Carranza that would virtually convert Mexico into a U.S. protectorate".<sup>[1]</sup> For Eisenhower narrative history eclipses analysis.

If Eisenhower's interpretation of Mexican political and social motivations are scanty, his understanding of

Wilson's policies are virtually non-existent. John Eisenhower bravely enters into the bloody military campaigns of the Mexican revolution, but fears to march into the academic battlegrounds of interpreting Wilsonian foreign policies. Is the essence of Wilson's policies legalism-moralism? Or, as N. Gordon Levin argues, did Wilson champion liberal-capitalism in an age of revolution? Did Wilson fear European nations would seek advantage and thus increase influence within the seething chaos of Mexican politics? Or were Wilson's policies an extension of the political battles between progressives and conservatives within the United States? Adding complexity to a possible pattern, Lloyd C. Gardner traces changes in Wilson's Mexican policies between 1913 and 1921, noting important discrepancies between Wilson's public statements and his policies. In his article entitled "Wilson and the Mexican Revolution," Gardner cites Wilson's definition of intervention as "the rearrangement and control of Mexico's domestic affairs by the U.S.," noting that he sought to prevent this total dominance.<sup>[2]</sup> Within a historiographical perspective, Wilson's Mexican policies have served as case studies to define and criticize Wilsonianism and as a moral template to analyze the impact of Wilson's foreign policy. The awkward sentence structure of Eisenhower's brief sortie into the roots of Wilson and William Jennings Bryan's foreign policy illustrates his discomfort with the subject. "Both were moralists, who thought of foreign policy in terms of the 'eternal verities' rather than in terms of the expedient, missionaries, evangelists, confident that they comprehended the peace and well-being of other countries better than the leaders of those countries themselves." From this perspective, Wilson's actions during the ten tragic days culminating in his assassination of Madero constitute the rationale, rather than the trigger, for U.S. intervention.

Eisenhower recognizes his intellectual dilemma in evaluating Wilson's foreign policy. He finds irony in the fact that the "Veracruz occupation and the Punitive Expedition were ordered by a man truly dedicated to peace, President Woodrow Wilson." He contrasts Wilson's ideals to James Polk's policies of 1847 which, Eisenhower argues, were "engineered by an avowed disciple of American expansionism." This comparison implies that expansionism precipitated by military force and the drive toward peace are contradictory impulses. While the historical reality of this relationship remains an area of debate, Eisenhower fails to carefully distinguish between reality and perception. Expansionism and military action can be perceived as a means towards peace; it was Wilson, after all, who fought the war to end all wars.

History, of course, is as much about the present as the past. Reading *Intervention!* in the fall of 2002, while the drums of war and intervention are beating and the phrase “regime change” has become a buzz word, influences how one interprets Wilson’s Mexican policy. Within this context, the Tampico incident, Wilson’s policies toward Huerta, and his decision to send troops into Vera Cruz stand as an early U.S. attempt, in this case successful, at regime change. Eisenhower interprets Wilson’s actions as deriving from his “ideal” of “an orderly and righteous government for Mexico,” in much the same way that current policy makers champion bringing democracy to Iraq. Eisenhower’s argument that “President Wilson’s fixation on removing Huerta from power appears to have been the result of a peevish personal vendetta, motivated at Huerta’s refusal to obey his dictates” resonates with President Bush’s emphasis on Saddam Hussain ordering an assassination attempt on the senior Bush. In both cases, moreover, U.S. control of oil fields form a sub-text (or, even, the primary motivation) of policy. Lastly historians and commentators of Wilson’s Mexican policy and Bush’s Iraq policy struggle to find the relationship between moralistic rhetoric and reality.

It is instructive to compare Eisenhower’s judgments with the analysis of Robert E. Quirk in his classic monograph on the occupation of Vera Cruz.<sup>[3]</sup> Quirk argues that Mexicans are more bitter about the intervention in Vera Cruz than the War of 1846 because they understand

the political motivations of the United States in 1846 but perceive Wilsonian moralism as hypocrisy. Indeed, Quirk concludes that Wilson “clothed American aggression in the sanctimonious raiment of idealism.” In the end, both Quirk and Eisenhower agree that the United States learned that intervention and regime change in Mexico was ineffectual. While the occupation of Vera Cruz was a key factor in the downfall of Huerta, Pershing’s punitive expedition was a failure. Social, cultural, economic, and political forces in Mexico determined, and continue to determine, Mexican policies. As the United States publicly demands regime change in Iraq—working in part with Iraqi dissident elements as distinct as Villistas, Zapatistas, and Carrancistas were in revolutionary Mexico—the lessons of the United States interventions during the second decade of the twentieth century take on immediate meaning.

#### Notes

[1]. In Frederick Katz, “Pancho Villa and the Attack on Columbus, New Mexico,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 83, No 1 (Feb. 1978): 102.

[2]. In Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World, 1913-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[3]. Robert E. Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Veracruz* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Martin Haas. Review of Eisenhower, John S. D., *Intervention! The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1917*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7247>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).