The 1st Mexican Empire of Agustín de Iturbide, 1822-1823
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Mexico achieved its independence from Spain in 1821 with the adoption of the Plan de Iguala. Although the country had rejected Spanish control, it did not abandon the idea of monarchy. Colonel Agustín de Iturbide’s plan took advantage of the unrest in Spain that threatened the Spanish king by offering Ferdinand VII the opportunity to move to Mexico City and rule over the new nation. In the case that Ferdinand VII declined to relinquish the Spanish throne and relocate to Mexico, the plan stipulated that another member of the Bourbon royal family be selected to serve in his stead. A thirty-six member junta and a five-man regency would govern during the time necessary to locate and install a monarch on the Mexican throne. To ensure continuity and stability, the Spanish constitution was considered in effect until Mexicans produced a new document to take its place. The signing of the Treaty of Cordova on August 24, 1821, set the articles of the plan in motion. The new government would be based on the three guarantees laid out in the Plan de Iguala: protection of the Catholic Church as the state religion, equality among Mexicans of all classes, and independence from Spain.

Subsequent events thwarted the plan’s full implementation. Spain rejected the Treaty of Cordova and refused to recognize Mexico’s independence. The result was that neither Ferdinand VII nor any of the Bourbon nobleman would accept the offered Mexican crown. As a result, uncertainty surrounded the choice of a future ruler. Additionally, Iturbide grew impatient with rivalries that developed between emerging political factions. According to him, the clamor to bestow accolades on certain individuals combined with the rush to divide up the spoils of the old Spanish empire drowned out the call for unity. The territorial extent of Mexico was not even clear since some Mexicans claimed most of Central America should be theirs as well. This sheer
vastness had always been a problem for the viceroyalty of New Spain—which stretched from Panama to Oregon—because it hampered travel and communication between its provinces.

Under Spanish rule locals had focused mainly on matters close to home, a situation that hindered the development of a national identity. Radical Mexican politicians had even begun to discuss abandoning the monarchy in favor of establishing a republic. Iturbide’s powerful position as both the head of the regency and commander in chief of the Army of the Three Guarantees made many uncomfortable, believing him too ambitious for the country’s good. He lambasted Congress for failing to produce the new constitution. Iturbide contended that the country was on the verge of descending into chaos, meaning the all of the strides so far gained would be for naught.

Iturbide’s rivals agreed that the situation was dire, but laid the blame at his feet. Their distrust of his intentions was about to confirmed by a dramatic development. According to Iturbide, Mexicans demanding change took matter into their own hands and insisted that he accept the imperial crown claiming that the author of independence from Spain should rightly be the Emperor of Mexico. He related that, “At ten o’clock on that memorable night [May 18, 1822] the people and garrison of Mexico [City] proclaimed me emperor. ‘Live Agustín the First,’ was the universal cry!” His first inclination, he said, was to put an end to the call but advisers warned him that those seeking his elevation would be insulted and become unruly. The next morning a delegation arrived at his home to escort him to a meeting with Congress. He related
that the crowd was so enthusiastic that they released the horses from his carriage and insisted on pulling the conveyance themselves. Critics claimed his protestations against accepting the crown disingenuous, contending that those calling for him to be made emperor were soldiers he commanded and *leperos* (beggars, criminals, etc.) that he had hired. Whatever the truth, Iturbide officially ascended to the Mexican throne as Agustín I on July 21, 1822. In reality, there was no other choice for either Iturbide or Mexico as the nation struggled to establish itself.

The new emperor faced serious problems plaguing Mexico when he took office. Years of warfare had left mining and agriculture in disarray. As an example of the financial loss caused by years of conflict, silver production, which amounted to $17,950,684 in 1810, had dropped to $5,600,022 in 1821. Commerce, which had depended on imports and exports controlled by Spain for nearly 300 years, had also sharply declined. The royal treasury was bare because public expenditures exceeded revenues raised by taxes. Needing funds, Mexico had to accept loans from English financiers, as well as levee loans within the country. Mexico desperately needed recognition by foreign nations, especially since Spain still claimed Mexico and threatened a military invasion. Distrust of Spaniards living in Mexico was on the increase. Moreover, the former provinces that comprised the new nation had little experience in cooperating with one another since each had communicated directly with the viceroy and his officials. To counter this and build a national identity, the Virgin of Guadalupe—a key symbol of the rebels during the independence movement—took on a greater role in forging bonds throughout Catholic Mexico. Intellectuals even attempted to reconnect modern Mexicans with the Aztec Empire as a means of invoking a common indigenous identity.

Texas came to the attention of the Mexican Empire. After years of effort by the Spanish, only three communities had taken hold in this part of Mexico’s northern frontier. This was
about to change as a result of Moses Austin’s request to bring settlers to the region. Reversing Spain’s previous policy, Mexico opened Texas to Catholic colonists from the United States and Europe. The new settlements would form a buffer between Mexico’s more populated areas and aggressive Comanche Indians who were pressing southward. Additionally, the colonists were expected to bring prosperity to Texas, thereby relieving pressure on royal defense expenditures. On January 3, 1823, Iturbide—who himself had received a land grant in Texas as part of the compensation for his service to Mexico—approved what would become the first of several laws designed to authorize and regulate colonization.

Given time and less public discord, Iturbide may have been able to address the problems he faced. However, his reign would be short. On October 31, 1822, frustrated with what he described as Congress’ continued infighting and unwillingness to draft a constitution, the emperor disbanded that body. His enemies claimed this was further evidence of his intention to rule Mexico as a tyrant. Monarchists (unhappy over not having a Bourbon on the throne) and republicans (unhappy over Mexico’s continued monarchy) put aside their differences and pushed back against Agustín I. Forced loans from the church had cost him support with the clergy. Moreover, rifts began to appear in the national army, which was really a coalition comprised of former royalists and rebels. Two generals, Antonio López de Santa Anna and Guadalupe Victoria, proved instrumentation in mounting opposition to Iturbide. On February 1, 1823, the Plan of Casa Mata called for a Constituent Congress to be assembled which would form a new government. With his base of power weakened to the point he could no longer direct events, the emperor agreed to
recall the old Congress back into session and, on March 19, 1822, abdicated his crown. Congress, however, refused to acknowledge his resignation believing that it would have legitimized his short reign, which many members considered to have been but a temporary usurpation of power by Iturbide.

The question became what to do with the former emperor. Even his rivals recognized Iturbide’s importance as a national hero and his widespread popularity. Congress arranged for the former emperor and his family’s permanent exile in Italy, where he would draw an annual pension for his past services the Mexico. On May 11, 1823, a British ship carrying Iturbide’s entourage departed Vera Cruz bound for Europe. Not content with his situation in Italy, Iturbide left Tuscany and relocated to England. Back in Mexico, Iturbide’s supporters called for his return. In response this agitation, Congress declared the former emperor a traitor and decreed he be put to death should he ever return. Iturbide was evidently unaware of this fact when he and his family sailed from England for home. Landing on the coast of Tamaulipas at Soto de Marina on July 14, 1824, Iturbide was taken prisoners by local officials. A brief trail yielded a guilty verdict and handed down a death sentence as punishment. Five days later on July 19 a firing squad carried out the order. Before he died, Iturbide issued one last stating, saying, "Mexicans! In the very act of my death, I recommend to you the love to the fatherland, and the observance to our religion, for it shall lead you to glory. I die having come here to help you, and I die merrily, for I die amongst you. I die with honor, not as a traitor; I do not leave this stain on my children and my legacy. I am not a traitor, no." His death failed to heal Mexico’s wounds. It did, however, clear the way for the creation of the first Mexican republic.
Bibliography

