

BROTHERS DIVIDED: MEXICO'S MASONIC WARS

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The Nineteenth Century has been called the Age of Revolution. It was a time when established governments were challenged by those they served. By 1800, the world had witnessed both the American and the French Revolutions. The absolute monarchies which still existed were threatened by new ideas concerning the "rights of man." The ideas that a king ruled by "Divine Right" and that his power was absolute was challenged everywhere.

In France, Spain, and throughout Europe new forces were coming to the fore. Because monarchies had supported and protected the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy, these two were inextricably linked. These conservative ideas collided with liberal thought fostered by those who favored a federal republic patterned after the United States.

Wherever conflict occurred, Masons were in positions of leadership; Simon Bolivar, Bernardo O'Higgins, and Jose de San Martin in South America; Garibaldi in Italy and Uruguay; George Washington and most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence in the United States; and the Bonapartes in France. All Masons can add other names to the list of illustrious brothers who joined in the struggle for freedom.

The Brotherhood of Man, a fundamental
Principal of the Masonic Order, provided
A connecting link with ideas of the
Masses and with republican nations.¹

Mexico was the only country to be divided by Masonic Wars in which the Scottish Rite and the York Rite entered into armed conflict to determine which faction of Masonry was to control the destiny of the nation.²

In the late 1700s, Mexico was ruled by Spain. This was an oppressive regime supported by conservatives, monarchists, large landholders, and the highest officials of the Roman Catholic Church. For the most part, these were natives of Spain (Gachupines) and their descendents. Arrayed against them were the Creoles (Mexican born of Spanish blood), and minor church officials.

The upper clergy (clero alto) comprised
The bishops and members of orders, most of
Them being Spaniards. The lower clergy
(clero bajo) included the priests, curates,
vicars, and other ecclesiastics of the sort.

Masonry had been outlawed in Spain as a consequence of a Papal Bull issued by Clement XII against Freemasons on April 28, 1738. This situation was changed as a result of the French Revolution, when Napoleon Bonaparte in May of 1808 forced Charles IV and his son and heir, Ferdinand, to renounce their claims to the Spanish throne. Joseph Bonaparte, the Grand Master of French Masons, was placed on the Spanish Throne and all restrictions on Masons and Masonry were removed.³ Many monarchists embraced Scottish Rite Masonry at this time. Scottish Rite Masonry received its name from the attempts of followers of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, to regain the thrones of England and Scotland for the Stuart dynasty. After the defeat of Charles's forces in 1715, many of the Stuart Masons escaped to France, where Mary Stuart had served as Queen prior to becoming Mary, Queen of Scots, and had embarked on an attempt to restore the Stuarts to the British throne.

During their stay in France, the Stuarts had been deeply involved in the dissemination of Freemasonry. Indeed they are generally regarded as the source of the particular form of Masonry known as the Scottish Rite. The Scottish Rite promised initiation into greater and more profound mysteries supposedly preserved and handed down in Scotland. And it elaborated not only on the antiquity, but also on the pedigree of the craft.⁴

Scottish Rite Masonry then had its beginning in political turmoil, evolving on the European continent as a secret organization seeking a political goal. It was this form of Masonry, practiced in Spain after the coronation of Joseph Bonaparte, which was exported to the New World.

In England, Masonry was largely apolitical, setting the example followed by American Masons today. While we are all aware of Masons who served the cause of liberty during the American Revolution, this was done as individuals, not as Master Masons. This was not to be the case in Mexico.

A Masonic Lodge may have existed in Mexico as early as 1785 or 1791. There can be no doubt that Masons were in Mexico and that they held meetings. In the absence of a charter for a lodge or a record of granting a charter in Mexico by a Grand Lodge during this period, it must be assumed that any lodge at that time in Mexico had the same status as that of the first. Masonic meetings in the English colonies of North America before 1735 ---- meetings

under “time immemorial” customs.⁵

Indeed Father Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla was made a Mason at a Scottish Rite Lodge located in Mexico City in 1806.⁶ With his cry for independence in 1810, “El Grito de Dolores” (Death to the Gachupines! Long live independence), began the fight for the separation of Mexico from Spain.

It may be said at the outset that in its beginning the Mexican Revolution was really a class war, having at its basis social jealousies and exclusion from preferments. The Revolution having been begun by an ecclesiastic, had from its incipency many members of the clergy, both secular and regular, among its leaders, and it may be said that at this time the war was kept up almost wholly by them. There was hardly a battle in which priests were not found as leading officers. Many of these priest were Master Masons.⁷

Hidalgo was defeated at Calderon on January 17, 1811, excommunicated from the Church, tried by civil authorities, and beheaded.⁸ The revolt was continued by another priest and Mason, Juan Moralos, who was also captured, excommunicated, and shot.⁹

In 1814, Ferdinand VII was elevated to the throne of Spain. The Inquisition was restored and Freemasonry was again outlawed.¹⁰ But the ideals of Freemasonry were too firmly established in Mexico to be denied.

Masons entered the country with the Spanish expedition forces in 1811. During this early period, the opposition of the Church to the Masons was only another force that trended to throw them more and more into the arms of the rebels.¹¹

Indeed, the independence movement had reached its apex in the Spanish colonies. From 1813 until 1820, Spanish troops were sent to put down an increasing number of rebellions throughout Latin America. When the ultra-liberals gained control of Spain’s political machinery, Spaniards loyal to the king concluded that only through revolution and independence for Mexico could they continue to protect their privileged position. They found an ardent follower in Augustin de Iturbide, an ambitious native Mexican who had obtained a commission in the Spanish Army that placed him in the aristocratic party. He was also a member of a Masonic lodge in Mexico City.¹²

Iturbide was an opportunist, and when he saw that the Viceroy was in an unsupportable position, he issued the Plan de Iguala on February 12, 1821. This plan, with its three guarantees

recognized the Roman Catholic religion while denying toleration of any other, called for continued privileges for the clergy, independence of Spain, and equality of the Creoles and Europeans in the government.¹³

This plan calling for independence and recognition of the Creoles quickly gained the support of the masses. Recognition of the church and continued clerical privileges gained the support of the conservatives. Masons gave their support to the movement, and it was only a matter of months until the country was controlled by the insurgents. With the signing of the Treaty of Cordoba on August 21, 1821, by Juan O'Donoju, Viceroy of New Spain, Mexico had gained its independence.

The first problem facing the new nation was the establishment of a government. The conservatives generally favored a monarchy which continued special privileges for the Church, the clergy, and large land-holders. The liberals favored a constitutional republic patterned after that of the United States. The monarchists were divided between those who favored a "Bourbon" king and those who favored Iturbide to be placed on the throne. When Congress met in February, 1823, Iturbide received sixty-seven out of eighty-two votes and became Emperor Augustin I of Mexico.¹⁴

Iturbide was the hero of the masses. He had led Mexico to independence. Because of the Plan of Iguala and its Three Guarantees, he had the support of the army and the clergy; however, opposition to him soon developed. Disappointed "Bourbonists" and Republicans combined to weaken his reign.

At this time, a new leader appeared on the Mexican scene. He was to dominate Mexican politics for the next thirty years. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna had trained in the army since boyhood. He knew the Mexican character and how to appeal to it. He had the charismatic personality necessary to gain adherents. He had money and the sense to use it. He was a man of noble impulses, especially in his early career, but with an inordinate ambition that drove him to throw scruples to the wind.¹⁵

Santa Anna who styled himself the Napoleon of the West in analyzing the political situation stated:

Don Augustin Iturbide did not know how to rise above temptation or the flattery of those who surrounded him. He wished to occupy the throne of Montezuma, to which he was not called, without foreseeing the consequences which quickly followed: his loss of prestige and anarchy. General opinion favored a regency, though the nation's representatives were actually disposing of its destiny. I shared this opinion.¹⁶

Santa Anna's opposition resulted in his removal from his army command. Santa Anna replied by taking up arms against Iturbide. As emperor, Iturbide did not dare reduce his army and thus he incurred expenses that made it impossible for him to continue without additional taxes. These were taxes the people would not tolerate.

On October 30, 1822, Emperor Augustin I dissolved the elected Congress. On December 6, 1822, Santa Anna formally proclaimed the Plan of Vera Cruz calling for the Congress to meet under the established rules and agree upon a form of government suitable to the country based on the principals of religion, independence, and liberty. During the month of December, Santa Anna quickly acquired both allies and opponents.¹⁷

Having lined up with the Republicans against Iturbide, Santa Anna soon found himself with the support of Nicholas Bravo, Vincente Guerrero, and Guadalupe Victoria. All were Masons. Guadalupe Victoria, who had formerly opposed Santa Anna, now had his support for the presidency under a federal republic. Within a short time, the liberals were in control of the Mexican government. Iturbide was forced to abdicate and went into exile in March, 1823.¹⁸

As is so often the case in history, the victors began quarrelling among themselves. Having united to defeat Iturbide, they now found it impossible to agree on a government to rule the nation. They generally divided among the lines of Centralists and Federalists. Among the Centralists were the Scottish Rite Masons and those favoring a monarchy. They favored a strong central government patterned after that of the United States. Its adherents were York Rite Masons and Republicans.¹⁹

To appreciate the alignment of the two Masonic groups, a brief description of the origin of the York Lodges in the country is in order. In the year 1825, Don Jose Maria Alpuche e Infante, senator from the State of Tabasco, conceived the idea of organizing the York Rite in Mexico, an idea which was aided by the President of the Republic, General Guadalupe Victoria. Five symbolic lodges were at once formed, and after they were established, Joel R. Poinsette, Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States in Mexico, was asked if they might secure through his friends the regulatory letters or patents.²⁰

With the overthrow of Iturbide, Masonry had become a major factor in the politics of the republic. The Scottish Rite or Escoceses had been the organization to which most prominent Mexicans belonged. As the Escoceses became more and more involved in political activities, many liberals sought an alternative, and determined to introduce the York Rite into Mexico which, in England and the United States, had remained aloof from politics.²¹

The rapid increase of this group, the York Rite or Yorkinos, soon gave them a larger following than that of the Escoceses. One reason for this strength was that the Spaniards, as distinguished from the Creoles, were aligned to the Escoceses.²²

Joel R. Pinsett, a Past Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina, was sent to Mexico as the first Minister from the United States in 1825 where he became quickly embroiled in Mexican politics. He jumped into the mire with both feet.

Angered by the attitude of the clerical and monarchial-minded Mexican conservatives, he tried to promote Republican principals, as he called it. He had discovered that Freemasonry had an immense hold on the educated classes and actually formed the basis for a political club in Mexico ... The Scottish Rite, or Escoceses, instead formed a genuine vehicle for the ultra-conservative cause. The liberal-minded Republican Mexicans were also strongly attracted to Masonry, but could not break the conservative control of the order.

Poinsett had what he felt was a brilliant inspiration. He introduced the York Rite into the capital, offering it to the liberals as their vehicle to compete with the Escoceses. Poinsett believed he was serving both the cause of liberty and of his country, but as the Yorkinos became a secret society plotting against the existing regime, the true effect on the ruling party can easily be imagined.²³

The Mexican Constitution of 1824 was patterned after that of the United States. Lorenzo de Zavala, later to serve as York Rite Grand Master and as Vice-President of the Republic of Texas, presided over the convention. While it declared the Roman Catholic Church as the official religion of Mexico, its other major provisions followed those of Mexico's neighbor to the north. One point of departure was the election of the President and Vice-President by the state legislatures with each state casting one vote. A lack of a majority of states would result in election by Congress. This constitution was a victory for liberalism because it provided for a federal republic.²⁴

The presidential election of 1824 saw the election of Guadalupe Victoria, a Mason and the candidate of the Federalists, as president. He secured a majority of the votes cast by the 17 states. Neither Nicolas Bravo nor Vicente Guerrero had a majority of those cast for the vice-

presidency, and the choice was left to Congress. Congress chose Nicolas Bravo, candidate of the Centralists. The chief executive of Mexico represented not only rival political parties, but rival Masonic factions as well.²⁵

As Guadalupe Victoria neared the end of his presidential term, and after almost three years of friction and discord, Nicolas Bravo withdrew from the capital and issued the Plan de Montano on December 34, 1827, in the village of Otumba.

It contained four points: the Congress was to prohibit by law all secret societies; the President's ministers were to be dismissed; Poinsett was to be driven out of Mexico; and the constitution was to be rigidly enforced. To the casual observer, the first provision may seem odd, but the reason is not hard to find. The President and his assistants, being Yorkinos, would be the first ones affected, and with the organization of the powerful enemy once destroyed, anything might happen in the rearrangement of affairs.²⁶

The ensuing conflict was one of the strangest wars ever fought, two opposing generals, each serving as Grand Master of a Masonic Grand Lodge, were to take arms against brother Masons. Nicolas Brovo was Grand Master of the Escoceses,²⁷ while Vicente Guerrero was Grand Master of the Yorkinos.²⁸ The two forces collided at Tulancingo at the northern outskirts of Mexico City where eight men were killed and six wounded. General Bravo and his chief lieutenants were captured. For all practical purposes the Escoceses ceased to exist as a political force.²⁹

In the election of 1828, the top leaders of the Yorkino party ran for the presidency. One of them was Manuel Gomez Pedraza, a former member of the Escoceses who had served as Minister of War under Victoria. The other was the successful general at the Battle of Tulancingo and at the Grand Master of the York Lodges, Vicente Guerrero, who had the support of Lorenzo de Zavala, Joel R. Poinsett, and Santa Anna. President Vicatoria, the conservatives, and the remnants of the Escoceses supported Pedraza. Feeling ran particularly high against Poinsett with several state legislatures calling not only for his expulsion from Mexico, but also that of Lorenzo de Zavala who had succeeded Guerreo as Grand Master of the York Rite Masons.

Under these conditions, the election took place. Gomez Pedraza gained ten of the nineteen state votes cast. Anastasio Bustamante was elected Vice-President. In the congressional elections, the Guerrero or Yorkino faction won a majority in the Chamber of Deputies which was elected by popular vote. The Senate remained in the hands of the followers of the Escoceses.³⁰

Although Santa Anna appealed to the people of Mexico by denouncing the election results

as the simple expressions of the will of the state legislatures, he could not recruit sufficient military force and popular backing for his revolt. Poinsett reported that Santa Anna was in arms for the fourfold purpose of preserving the federal government, protecting the sovereign rights of the people, elevating the immortal Guerrero to the Presidency, and accomplishing the total expulsion of the Spaniards. Santa Anna expressed his appreciation to the “illustrious American” who represented the first republic of Columbus’ world; he further added that he had observed that the United States wanted nothing but “the prosperity of the new republics of the American Continent,” thus identifying himself with certain unnamed principals which he thought united all the nations of the Western Hemisphere.³¹

President Victoria took the field against Santa Anna and defeated him; however, an uprising in Mexico City convinced Pedraza that he could never hope to rule a country as divided as Mexico was. He left Mexico. The Congress declared an end to Victoria’s term of office, Vicente Guerrero would become President of Mexico.³²

From a legal standpoint, there is no doubt that Pedraza was the legally elected president of Mexico. As a reaction to the Masonic Wars, a new political party emerged that was composed of the remnants of the Escoceses, the more conservative elements of the Yorkinos, representatives of the army and the clergy, and the property owning class. They adopted the name of Hombres de Bien. In the Vice-President, Anastasio Bustamante, they had a friend in the highest level of government.

On December 4, 1829, Bustamante issued the Plan of Jalapa. It called for the return of the Constitution of 1824 and the removal of Vicente Guerrero as President. On February 14, 1831, after being betrayed by one of his trusted followers, Guerrero was shot, and Anastasio Bustamante assumed the Presidency.³³

Since 1831, most of the presidents of the Republic of Mexico have been members of the Fraternity; however, the downfall of Guerrero marks the end of Masonry as an outstanding political force in Mexico. The Escoceses had been scattered and the Yorkinos split. Poinsett returned to the United States.

From the divided Fraternity, there arose the Rito Nacional Mexicano. It gained strength from its inception. Masonry ceased to be divided; brotherhood prevailed. The Masonic Wars came to an end, and with them one of the strangest occurrences in the long history of the Order.

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- ³³ Ibid., p. 69