

John Dewey, “Imperialism is Easy” in *The New Republic*, 50 (March 23, 1927).

In common, I imagine, with large numbers of my fellow countrymen, I had long entertained in a vague way the notion that imperialism is a more or less consciously adopted policy. The idea was not clearly formulated, but at the back of my head was the supposition that nations are imperialistic because they want and choose to be, in view of advantages they think will result. A visit to Mexico, a country in which American imperialism is in the making, knocked that notion out of my head. The descent to this particular Avernus is unusually easy. Given, on the one hand, a nation that has capital and technical skill, engineering and financial, to export, plus manufacturers in need of raw material, especially iron and oil, and, on the other hand, an industrially backward country with large natural resources and a government which is either inefficient or unstable, or both, and it does not require intention or desire to involve the first nation in imperialistic policies. Even widespread popular desire to the contrary is no serious obstacle. The natural movement of business enterprise, combined with Anglo-American legalistic notions of contracts and their sanctity, and the international custom which obtains as to the duty of a nation to protect the property of its nationals, suffices to bring about imperialistic undertakings.

Imperialism is a result, not a purpose or plan. It can be prevented only by regulating the conditions out of which it proceeds. And one of the things which most stands in the way of taking regulatory measures is precisely the consciousness on the part of the public that it is innocent of imperialistic desires. It feels aggrieved when it is accused of any such purpose, then resentful, and is confusedly hurried into dangerous antagonisms, before it perceives what is happening. The charge of imperialistic desires sounds strange to the group of men who have created the situation in which they appeal to their home country for intervention. All they want, as they indignantly assert, is protection of life and property. If their own government cannot afford that protection, what is it good for anyway?

In Mexico, and presumably in other Latin-American states, conditions are exacerbated by the extended meaning which has been given the Monroe Doctrine. In this widened meaning it has become one of the chief causes of the growing imperialism of the United States. Investors and concession holders from European countries are estopped from appealing to their own

countries for intervention to give them protection. Pressure is consequently brought to bear upon the United States. Unless we act, we are a dog in a manger. We won't do anything ourselves, and we won't let anybody else do anything. Thus the United States has become a kind of trustee for the business interests of other countries. As one consequence, the animosity which might otherwise be distributed among a number of countries is consolidated, and then directed at the United States. About the most promising thing which could happen would be for our people to realize, with vividness, the Spanish-American view of the Monroe Doctrine. We still, for the most part, pat ourselves on the back complacently for upholding it. We think of it as a benevolent measure for which all Central and South America is, or should be, grateful to us. We do not take into account the change in conditions in these states; their growth in power and national consciousness, which makes them resent being treated as infants under our tutelage. We are not aware of the change in conditions brought about by our development into a nation possessed of enormous capital seeking investment, a fact which makes the countries to the south much more afraid of us than they are of Europe. In consequence, the sacred doctrine has become entangled with all the forces which plunge us into imperialistic dangers.

The average citizen of the United States has little knowledge of the extent of American business and financial interests in Mexico. It does not occur to him that, from the standpoint of intelligent Mexicans, that country is, or was, in great danger of becoming an economic dependency of this country. As things went under the Diaz regime, the Mexicans might have awakened some morning and found their natural resources, agricultural and grazing lands, mines and oil wells, mainly in the hands of foreigners, largely Americans, and managed for the profit of investors from foreign countries. I well remember how one indignant legal representative of American business concessionaires contrasted the present regime with that of Diaz. He said: "Diaz had a standing order that any complaint from any American citizen was to be settled the same day it was made." This was his naive tribute to the Diaz administration. In contrast with it, the Calles regime naturally appears to Americans with investments as something unspeakable.

I would not say that it gives no cause for legal complaint; I would not say that it does not afford many an occasion for protest. From the Mexican standpoint, the government is fighting for control of its own country, as much as if it were at war, and too scrupulous a regard for legal technicalities might mean defeat. An unusually frank Mexican ex-official said to an

American business man: "Of course, we have to handicap you by legislation and administration in every way we can. You are much abler and more experienced in business than we are; if we don't even up some other way, you will soon own the whole country." Such things indicate the ease with which the relations of an industrially advanced and a backward country ultimately drift into situations where the vested legal rights which have grown up are confronted by a vigorous national sentiment, and can hardly be maintained without appeal to government intervention.

The ease with which imperialism follows economic exploitation is indicated by the almost unanimous sentiment of Americans resident in Mexico, including those who do not own concessions and who are not directly affected by the new laws. They would deny, and as far as their conscious intent is concerned, deny sincerely, for the most part, any imperialistic taint. What they want is simply "protection" for American rights. Judging from conversations, the objects of their dislike stand in about the following order: in the first rank, they are irritated with Americans having no business interests, who come down there for a few weeks, talk with plausible Mexicans, and, with the usual prejudice against "Wall Street," go away more or less pro-Mexican. Locally, such visitors would be gladly consigned to a lethal chamber. They are said to be completely ignorant, and yet they assume to know more about the right relations between Mexico and the United States than "we do who have lived here many years, and know the facts about the persecution of Americans and the disregard for their rights." President Wilson was not one of this class, but he succeeded in winning the equal dislike of American residents and of Mexicans, of the latter by his action, and of the former by his talk against concessionaires, a talk which "encouraged Mexican Bolshevism."

Next in order comes irritation with the American State Department, based on the fact that while "it is always writing notes, it never does anything." There is little doubt on the Mexican side of the line as to what "doing something" means. Super-patriots, on this side, may suppose that it signifies a show of force such as has taken place in Nicaragua. On the spot, they know that it means not only war and continued guerrilla strife, but taking control of the government, and managing Mexican affairs for a number of years. To be sure, there is the usual pious talk, also quite sincere as far as the consciousness of many Americans is concerned. We should, of course, set up a model of administration, multiply schools, and after we have shown the Mexicans how a state should be managed, should turn it over to them, in good running order. It is not difficult for the American who has been expatriated for a number of years to idealize

the honesty and efficiency of our own government, in contrast with the corruption, inefficiency and, above all, instability, which have obtained in Mexico. The favorite idea, which is even shared, it is rumored, in diplomatic quarters, is that Great Britain and the United States shall unite in this benevolent undertaking. Was this in Mr. Hearst's mind when he made his recent touching appeal for closer cooperation between this country and Great Britain?

An American oil man, who knows his Mexico well, one of the adventurous type which is personally more attractive than the smug legalistic, told us that they did not ask for the support of the State Department; all they wanted was to be let alone. He said, as an indication of how they could take care of themselves, that at one time all was in readiness for three independent states in Mexico, one including Vera Cruz, another Tampico, and a third the lands in the north, next to the American border, where immigrants from this side had settled. At Tampico, he said, 2,000 American workmen, engaged in the oil industry, were furnished with rifles. There was perhaps some romantic exaggeration in the tale, but there was also a residuum of fact. Of course, these revolutions were not to be undertaken by Americans, but by dissatisfied Mexicans. Unfortunately, the State Department said No.

Third in the order of dislike, as far as talk goes, comes the Calles government.

Below this state of mind, instances of which might be given indefinitely, is the conflict between Anglo-American institutional psychology, especially with reference to charters, contracts and other legal points, and the Spanish-Latin temper. The two mix no better than oil and water., and unfortunately there is no great disposition to discover and use any emulgents. As usually happens with small colonies in a foreign country, the native "Anglo-Saxon" psychology stiffens up, instead of relaxing. The years of civil war, of chaos and destruction, which Mexico has gone through, make it easy for outsiders to maintain an attitude of superiority and aloofness. The supposed principle of international law by which it is the duty, rather than simply the right, of a nation to come to the protection of the rights of its nationals when they are disregarded, makes the conflict of interests and of traditions a serious menace to peace. Our constitutional system is an additional source of danger. Congress must be consulted before war can be declared. But the President is the Commander of the Army and Navy, and it is only too easy to create a situation after which the cry "stand by the President," and then "stand by the country," is overwhelming.

Public opinion has spoken with unusual force and promptitude against interference in Mexico. But the causes of the difficulty, and underlying forces which make for imperialistic ventures, are enduring. They will outlast peaceful escape from the present crisis, supposing we do escape. Public sentiment, to be permanently effective, must do more than protest. It must find expression in a permanent change of our habits. For at present, both economic conditions and political arrangements and traditions combine to make imperialism easy. How many American citizens are ready for an official restatement of the Monroe Doctrine? How many are willing to commit the country officially to the statement that American citizens who invest in backward foreign countries do so at their own risk?

John Dewey (1859-1952), whose writings on philosophy and education are still widely studied, was a vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League from 1910-1920. When he wrote this article in 1927 he was a contributing editor to *The New Republic* and honorary chair of the Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America.