Review/Reseña


Ambivalent caudillo? Reinterpreting Santa Anna of Mexico

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This reevaluation of Antonio López de Santa Anna is long overdue given the growing sophistication of our understanding of Mexico’s turbulent decades following independence in 1810. Although much remains to be done, during the last two decades historians have finally turned their gaze to the early nineteenth century and Will Fowler makes excellent use of the new historiography. Santa Anna’s image looms large in Mexico’s historical narrative, where he generally plays the role of the duplicitous
unprincipled villain. This caricature has put down deep roots in both academic and popular history and Fowler points out that the facile denunciation of Santa Anna has created a distorted view of this critical period in the nation’s history. The introduction, with the obligatory alliterative subtitle “Traitor, Turncoat, and Tyrant,” provides a succinct summation and a trenchant critique of the traditional view of the “anti-hero” and sets out his objective to provide a balanced revision of Santa Anna’s career. Fowler then moves away from the usual efforts to assign blame by asking the straightforward question of why the caudillo from Veracruz came to dominate national politics during the formative decades of the Mexican republic.

Fowler offers some intriguing answers to this question, providing the reader with what might be summed up as Santa Anna’s path to success. Perhaps the most innovative element in the biography is the importance that the author ascribes to Santa Anna’s provincial origins. The general played such a prominent role on the national stage that the traditional historiography treated his experience as a regional caudillo only as prelude to national power. Santa Anna was first and foremost a regional power broker and his first concern was to consolidate his authority in his home state of Veracruz. Fowler’s acute understanding that local politics came to dominate Mexico during the period led him to recognize the central role it played in launching Santa Anna’s career. Rather than seeing him as a military caudillo, Fowler presents him as first and foremost a provincial boss who used his native state to project himself onto the national stage.

Veracruz provided Santa Anna with the perfect springboard to national power. The port and its roads leading to the altiplano served as the principal route to the outside world and taxes on international trade became the national government’s key source of income after independence. Controlling the port and its surrounding areas, precisely Santa Anna’s center of influence, became a critical necessity for any national government. The author notes that had Santa Anna been from Oaxaca he might have become an important politician but that it would have been difficult for him to maintain the sway he had over the nation without controlling the choke point of the nation’s commerce and finances.
Santa Anna’s success even had a biological facet. The general and his loyal jarochos (the name applied to the residents of the Veracruz port and its environs) had a natural resistance to the dreaded lowland diseases, while outside armies and politicians occasionally sent to subdue them often retreated in the face of the infamous mortality of the tropics.

Rather than relying on usual assertions concerning his “charisma” or his military status, this book reveals that Santa Anna’s control of his home state was not easy or automatic. Much of the first third of the book is dedicated to understanding how he created a regional political machine. While his family belonged to the merchant class with roots in both Xalapa and the port, it was far from being the richest or the most powerful. His not inheriting his power and his reputation as an outsider probably enhanced his image among the new class of provincial politicians who emerged after the collapse of the imperial state. According to Fowler, the general was never at ease in the truly aristocratic circles of Mexico City. He did, however, use family ties to further his career and was especially judicious at making marriage alliances.

Santa Anna’s first step towards building a power base came as a result of his role pacifying the towns outside the walls of the port during the war of independence—an area that had defied numerous efforts of the royalist army to eradicate the rebels preying on commerce along the royal road. As a young officer he served in the anti-insurgent campaigns in Texas and Northern Mexico and only returned to his home region in 1818 where he began implementing the government’s new policy of settling amnestied insurgents on lands abandoned during the war. Fowler describes the process as a form of militarized land reform in which Santa Anna organized the rebels into communities endowed with property where he played the role of paternalist overseer (he calls it a “mini-military autocracy” 36). While as a young officer he carried out vicious reprisals against Northern insurgents, in his home province his late arrival on the scene meant that he could play the role of the generous conciliator.

The chapter detailing the convoluted events surrounding the Santa Anna’s adherence to the Plan of Iguala, the subsequent creation of an imperial government, and his role in the overthrow of Agustín Iturbide and
the Plan de Casa Mata is a fine piece of historical detective work. Fowler uncovers the role of local actors, such as the municipal councils in the port and Xalapa, often overlooked in previous accounts where the role of the army or the national actors predominates. During this period, Santa Anna’s position was far from secure and Fowler demonstrates how he competently outmaneuvered his local rival José Rincón and overcame opponents in the powerful municipalities of Xalapa and Veracruz. By manipulating information, he kept his superiors, such as Iturbide, guessing until it was too late. Santa Anna was a cagey politician who used the press and his negotiating skills to overcome local opponents without recurring to force. In short, he did not simply ride to power at the point of bayonets.

He also knew when to play second fiddle. During the “plan de Veracruz” against Iturbide’s government, Santa Anna demurred to the insurgent hero, Guadalupe Victoria, a ploy that had the virtue of linking his career to that of a man long identified with the cause of independence and diverting criticism that personal ambition motivated his actions. The author points out that Santa Anna, especially in his early career, was astute at cultivating the patronage of powerful men: as a young royalist he was close to the province’s Spanish governor José García Dávila, as a republican he hooked his wagon to Victoria and later Vicente Guerrero. These bonds of subordination and affection were sincere and when he broke them, as he did when he joined the Plan de Iguala against the wishes of García Dávila, it created a true personal crisis.

Once Santa Anna consolidated political control of the province he worked to keep it. His famous accumulation of wealth in the form of vast estates was not just about the money; rather the properties offered yet another way to exercise control over the roads connecting Mexico to its port of Veracruz. He used his lands to re-enforce his political position and act as the patron to his employees and tenants. In a pinch, he could raise men, horses, and money from his own properties. Santa Anna was meticulous in the administration of his haciendas and dedicated much time and energy to insure their success. Fowler also suggests here that Santa Anna’s wealth was not the result of his ability to tap the resources of the treasury, but that he could be a very competent entrepreneur. He was an excellent hacienda
administrator even as he was a terrible chief executive of the nation: evidently he enjoyed managing tenants and herds of cattle but herding congressmen quickly exasperated him.

Santa Anna’s military experience in the royalist army also taught him that not only is it important to win battles, one must make sure that the written reports (especially those published in official gazettes) magnify the victory. Santa Anna established an important alliance during the Plan de Iguala with his fellow officer José María Tornel who proved to be his most effective collaborator and propagandist. When, for example, Dávila refused to deal with his former protégé Santa Anna and agreed to surrender the port only to Santa Anna’s enemy and perennial challenger for the leadership of Veracruz, Manuel Rincón, Tornel made sure that Mexico City newspapers described Santa Anna as the liberator of Veracruz regardless of whoever signed the formal capitulation (55). From the founding of the independent state, Santa Anna appreciated the importance of the press in the new political environment.

Most biographers have noted Santa Anna’s military status as a key source of his power and Fowler brought some balance to the general opinion that he was a version of a military dictator. However, it was his military reputation that made him into a national political figure and that throughout his different administrations he carefully cultivated a military following. The turning point between his status as a prominent provincial strongman and a national actor was his role in the Mexican victory over the Spanish invasion of 1829 and the well-orchestrated publicity that accompanied the news.

His failures in Texas and the U.S.-Mexican war have eclipsed his reputation as a military leader, but in the eyes of his contemporaries his battles repulsing the Spanish invasion, humbling the old colonial power, and the French attempt to seize Veracruz in 1838, as well as his campaigns in the civil wars of 1828 and 1832, established his status as the nation’s greatest general. His energetic pursuit of victory, often throwing caution to the wind captivated the audiences who read of his exploits in the press (often with the hand of Tornel involved.) His tenacious persistence to keep fighting during several of the pronunciamientos he participated in (such as
the 1828 campaign) demonstrated that he was a dangerous opponent on the battlefield. This text presents the man as a soldier’s soldier, a general who led his troops from the front line and who generally looked after the welfare of his army. He was always happier to be in the bivouac than in the National Palace. At the same time, he was ruthless: willing to assault cities such as Guanajuato or Oaxaca without regard to either civilian casualties or his own soldiers’ lives in order to achieve his objectives.

Santa Anna sought to use subterfuge to lure his opponents into traps he set, a characteristic contemporaries noted when they dubbed him the “general of tricks” (116). Often he tried too hard to go for the Hail Mary pass with disappointing results. Another failure of his military leadership was his lack of caution—for example, during the Texas campaign when he insisted on pushing his troops to San Jacinto rather than waiting for columns led by his subordinates to join him. His personal bravery and his willingness to take big risks helped him win the admiration of his superiors as a young officer but proved to be disastrous when it was his turn to lead the nation’s armies.

Fowler at one point brings up Thomas Carlyle and the “great man” view of history, a common enough approach in biographies, but his account of Santa Anna’s politics suggests that the great man did shape events rather than reflect the changing opinion of the period. Santa Anna’s political transformations were the result of the evolving political realities Mexican leaders faced in the first five decades of the nineteenth century. He began his political trajectory as a provincial federalist and moved towards his centralist and authoritarian incarnations along with many prominent men of his generation. In a thesis that Fowler developed in his book Mexico in the Age of Proposals, he points out that a large segment of Mexico’s ruling elite drifted towards centralism as they grew disenchanted with the political disorder associated with popular mobilizations of the first federal republic. Santa Anna’s move towards authoritarianism, he argues, reflected the generalized disillusion with the republic and was not an act of personal political treason. The text argues that Santa Anna’s adoption of broad dictatorial powers was a result of his frustration with the failures of both
the federalist (1824-35, 1846-52) and the centralist (1835-46) constitutional experiments.

Fowler seeks to rescue Santa Anna’s political reputation in three ways. First, he dismisses the idea that he was driven by a desire to become a dictator, noting that he passed on opportunities to take or keep dictatorial powers in 1834 and 1841. Only during his last spell in power (1853-55) did he rule as an absolute dictator. Interestingly, Fowler describes the move to dictatorship as originating from within the santanista political circle and not from the caudillo himself and then only as a means to preserve the nation after the disastrous U.S. war (292, 296-7). Fowler sees Santa Anna’s descent into authoritarianism as a result of the crisis in the Mexican state, a sense that there was no other alternative; on the other hand, throughout the text he notes the general’s impatience with the messy procedures of civilian republican rule.

Second, Fowler seeks to give coherence to Santa Anna’s politics by describing the santanista faction as more than a personalist cabal. In his view, the santanistas were a coherent political alternative whose “political realism” caused them to advocate a “peace and order” program that ultimately embraced authoritarianism, not unlike the liberal developmentalist Latin American governments of the late nineteenth century (302). He argues that the santanista intellectuals came to the conclusion that a dictatorship was necessary before their candidate for the dictatorship did (291-96). Fowler is at pains to point out that Santa Anna had an effective team of especially loyal (and sometimes very competent) collaborators and that his rule was absolutely impossible without them.

Third, the author describes Santa Anna’s initiatives when he took the time to rule (especially the 1841-44 period) in some detail demonstrating that he had concrete objectives beyond personal aggrandizement and often sought to implement genuine reforms. Fowler notes that his educational initiatives during his last two periods in office were effective and innovative (218, 303) and that he promoted nationalist development projects. He could play the populist politician and was careful to placate different civilian constituencies that brought him to power (for example, 218-22). In an era when Mexican governments were notoriously
ineffective Santa Anna’s administrations were able to get things done. It should be remembered, however, that this is not a very high standard to meet and that the accomplishments of the caudillo’s rule proved to be fleeting.

Santa Anna sought to present himself as the patriot without ideology who could mediate between the differing factions to bring peace to the republic. As many officers in Latin America have done after him, he pretended that the army represented a kind of anti-politics. Santa Anna’s lavish support of the military was more than buying the loyalty of the guns he needed to stay in power; he believed that the army was the only institution that was truly national and able to balance the conflicting claims of politicians. This assertion ultimately transformed itself into the conviction that the political factions were the cause of Mexico’s problem and only their exclusion could save the nation. Fowler notes that even at the earliest stages of his career he came into conflict with civilian authorities on the town councils of his home province. His last administration saw the fruition of his authoritarian influences: he exercised press censorship to a level unseen since independence and persecuted politicians, especially of the liberal stripe. Once he silenced all the naysayers it did not take long for Santa Anna’s propaganda machine to become an unhinged personality cult.

Santa Anna’s last stint in national power illustrates the absolute failure of his approach to ruling. He governed unimpeded by either the press or constitutional limits in the name of national unity and order yet when faced with the aggressive posturing of the United States over the Mesilla territory (known as the Gadsden Purchase North of the border) he quickly sacrificed national territory to avoid a war. Fowler details the general’s appraisal of the crisis outlining in detail his justifications for ceding to the US demands (306-7), but in spite of the elaborate reasons, it demonstrated the hollowness to Santa Anna’s rule. His government dedicated the lion’s share of the county’s resources to the army, yet this soldier-politician did not see it as being up to its primordial task of defending the national territory. Santa Anna’s defense of the cessation on the grounds that he got a very good price for a desert territory rings false
when, as Fowler notes, the uncontrolled corruption of the regime quickly dissipated the cash windfall.

Santa Anna’s often-erratic actions in office undercut the effectiveness of Fowler’s effort to rescue his reputation as a ruler. Santa Anna constantly played the role of the reluctant caudillo. Once he gained control of the presidency in 1833 as a result of leading a bloody civil war in the defense of federalism, he left it in the hands of his vice-president, Valentín Gómez Farías. By 1834, Santa Anna became disenchanted with the actions of the radicals who dominated the congress but rather than trying to politically outmaneuver them he ousted the congress through a \textit{pronunciamiento} and ultimately trashed the federalist constitution. In 1841 he again displayed his reluctance to occupy the office he had maneuvered to control. He always opted to lead troops in the field instead of staying in the capital to deal with the messy issues of governance. At moments of crisis he marched off at the head of armies distant to battlefields (Texas in 1836, Buena Vista in 1847, and Acapulco in 1854) evidently in the hopes that a brilliant victory would secure his position and resolve the problems facing the state. In short, he liked to gamble with the fate of the nation.

Dictatorships are often able to “clean up the streets” and provide law and order, but in Santa Anna’s case even in this area his accomplishments were short lived. His reputation for effectiveness was seriously hampered by the flagrant corruption that characterized his later administrations. His accumulation of wealth and estates ultimately destroyed the image he cultivated as a selfless patriot.

Although he seeks to rescue Santa Anna from his many detractors, Fowler is not a booster—his text does not gloss over Santa Anna’s failures on the field of battle and in government. Fowler’s Santa Anna is a tragic figure. The portrait that emerges is one of a man who rose to a position beyond his capabilities but, Fowler would add, as a result we tend to forget how well he performed in his role as a commander of troops instead of armies, as a provincial strongman instead of a national savior. He was thrust into a position where he did not understand the deeper social and political dilemmas that plagued the nation. The nation would have been no worse and his reputation would have been much better if he had followed
his instinct and stayed away from the national capital. While he could often be a brilliant politician, his military experience often blinded him to the reality that bayonets alone could not resolve Mexico’s dilemmas. His willingness to resort to force and his tendency to see opposition as treason increased with every term in office.

The author draws parallels to the disillusionment of Simón Bolívar: the fate of the leaders of independence is indeed a sad story. Bolívar and Santa Anna abandoned the optimism of their early careers and embraced authoritarian alternatives that ended miserably. Santa Anna’s failures were not unique and the disasters of the period had deeper structural causes that were simply beyond his capabilities. Latin America did not lack great men, but it had even greater problems. Perhaps no ruler could have solved the problems Santa Anna confronted, but the real tragedy is that Santa Anna never realized that he was not the man to solve them either. Santa Anna came to believe that he was the providential man—indispensable to the nation’s survival long after it was evident to all that providence no longer smiled upon him. To add to this depressing portrait Fowler includes a chapter detailing the ex-president’s increasingly hopeless attempts to get back into power in the last twenty years of his life. Santa Anna lived long after his political career was a corpse.

The author strives to make early republican Mexico understandable to the non-specialist and he largely succeeds in the Herculean task of unpacking the tumultuous political history of the period. The text is eminently readable and undergraduates and the general reader will find the detailed chronology in the appendix extremely useful for keeping track of the events (but regrettably there are no maps). The portrait of the private life of the caudillo touching on issues of family life and daily customs help round out our understanding of the period and provide a deep social context of the man’s character that is both useful and enjoyable.

Readers will judge this biography on the basis of its claim to provide a new balanced view but balance is a subjective term and many will reject any effort that might be deemed a “rehabilitation” of this controversial figure. There are moments in the biography when Fowler grants Santa Anna’s justifications more merit than they deserve. There are times when
he does not do enough to point out how flawed Santa Anna’s view of events was. But for serious students of the period the text reframes old issues in interesting ways and demonstrates how previously unavailable or underused local sources can reinvigorate historical inquiry. One may not agree with all of the interpretations Fowler puts forward but his analysis is always insightful and well founded in a provocative reading of an impressive collection of primary sources. This biography will become an obligatory text for students of the period that will also hold the attention of the casual reader.