A black and white portrait of Matías Romero, a man with a full beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a dark tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression.

MATÍAS ROMERO AND THE CRAFT OF DIPLOMACY: 1837-1898

Graciela Márquez and Sergio Silva Castañeda



SECRETARÍA DE RELACIONES EXTERIORES
MÉXICO

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Index

Foreword	11
Marcelo Luis Ebrard Casaubon	
Acknowledgements.....	15
Introduction	17
Oaxaca and its Institute of Sciences and the Arts: The Two Birthplaces of Romero	21
War and Diplomacy, 1857-1867.....	29
“The Hardest Position”: The Secretariat for Finance and Public Credit	49
From North to South: Diplomacy Again, 1882-1898.....	61
Colophon: The Death of the Ambassador	103
Sources	113
Index of images	117

Foreword

Each year, the Matías Romero Institute (IMR, by its acronym in Spanish) enriches the editorial heritage of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE, by its acronym in Spanish) with publications on international relations of the world, and Mexico's foreign policy and diplomatic history. Given Mexico's extensive international ties and the very diverse activities the SRE undertakes in the interests of Mexico's foreign affairs, it should come as no surprise that the countless documents published over time are extremely varied, ranging from those required for the SRE's day-to-day operations to reports, treaties and agreements, journalistic, iconographic and other documents that have served as a starting point for research by historians and experts in international relations. A prime example is *Matías Romero and the Craft of Diplomacy: 1837-1898*, a book that is the product of exhaustive research by its authors, Graciela Márquez Colín and Sergio Silva Castañeda.

Among its many merits, *Matías Romero and the Craft of Diplomacy* skillfully combines the history of Mexico and that of Mexican diplomacy, while putting Matías Romero's biography into the historic context of Mexico and the rest of the world. Written in a style befitting of the authors' academic training, the book nonetheless brings readers a highly accessible account of the life and times of Matías Romero, a man who witnessed some of the most tumultuous years of nineteenth-century Mexican history and whose career as a diplomat was marked by milestone events, such as the war against the United States, the Revolution of Ayutla and the Reform War. Yet his most complex challenge—the one that was to establish him as an accomplished diplomat and historic figure—was to represent Mexico before the United States amid the expansionist threat posed by the latter and European intervention in Mexico at a time that was to prove one of the most difficult chapters in Mexican history. During his sojourn in Washington, he climbed the ladder from secretary of the Mexican legation and

chargé d'affairs to extraordinary envoy and minister plenipotentiary, gaining invaluable experience and knowledge that would enable him to steer the course of Mexico's most important relationship. In time, he learned to navigate the labyrinth of U.S. politics, raising support for Mexico's cause and playing a major role furthering the liberal cause, while defending Mexico's sovereignty.

Later, during the Restored Republic and the Porfiriato, Matías Romero was to serve as Finance minister on three separate occasions, enabling him to put into practice his liberal economic convictions and promote Mexico's development by exploiting its mineral resources and fostering trade in raw materials and agricultural products. During the interim periods, he had the opportunity to dabble in business as a coffee producer and a partner in the building of the southern railroad in his native state of Oaxaca. Finally, he would return to diplomacy as extraordinary envoy and minister plenipotentiary in the United States. One of the many tasks he was commissioned with in this capacity was to guide diplomatic efforts in the negotiation of the Reciprocity Treaty of 1883, which sought equal trade benefits for both nations; the Boundaries Treaty of 1882 with Guatemala, which established the definitive boundaries of Mexico's southern border with Guatemala; and the International Conference of American States in 1889-1890, which fostered closer ties between Pan-American nations. In 1898, Mexico's diplomatic representation in the United States was to be-

come an embassy and Matías Romero was named the first Mexican ambassador to the United States, marking the pinnacle of his brilliant diplomatic career in Washington, during which time he became familiar with the inner workings of U.S. politics and, as he himself put it, much of the country's unwritten history.

Such was Matías Romero's contribution to Mexico that he is considered one of the country's most prominent historic figures and a model of the diplomat par excellence. As the book's title indicates, Graciela Márquez and Sergio Silva offer readers insight into the essence of diplomat's craft and the responsibilities that come with the terrain. The book also sheds light on why Matías Romero is today held up as an example for both practicing Mexican diplomats and new generations that aspire to join the Mexican Foreign Service (SEM, by its acronym in Spanish) and who are studying at the institute so fittingly named after this sagacious statesman.

The Matías Romero Institute was officially founded on December 14, 1974 to institutionalize the training of future generations of diplomats, and groom a high-level academic and technical corps specializing in diplomacy, international politics and Mexican foreign policy to facilitate the work of the Mexican Foreign Service, the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs and other government institutions. Since then, the IMR has undergone structural reforms that have established it as an institution governed by standards of excellence, and strengthened its presence both

at home and abroad, to the extent that it currently ranks among the top schools in Mexico for the training of civil servants.

As is requisite for all top institutions, the IMR needs to adapt to the fast-changing dynamics of international relations in the 21st century. Mexico needs to be prepared to play a more active role on the international arena, not just because of the size of its economy, but because of its undeniable contribution to and influence over global issues, based on the promotion of universal values, a principled foreign policy and the country's prestige as a respected multilateral actor. As such, it is important the Matías Romero Institute not only forge ahead with the vital task of training diplomatic corps to carry out the work of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs overseas, but that it fully embrace its calling as a research and strategic analysis center

for international affairs, capable of providing the authorities responsible for designing and executing Mexico's foreign policy with studies and findings that address the priority issues on the country's international agenda.

This year, the IMR celebrates its 45th anniversary and what better occasion to step up endeavors to diversify and strengthen this prestigious institution, so it can accompany Mexico into the new era. It is also an excellent opportunity to celebrate a new edition of this book, in both Spanish and English, by way of homage to the outstanding diplomat Matías Romero was and acknowledgement of the daily efforts of all those who make Mexican diplomacy possible.

Marcelo Luis Ebrard Casaubon
Foreign Affairs Minister

Acknowledgements

W

e would like to thank Chancellor Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon for his invaluable support in making a publication of this nature possible. Likewise, we greatly appreciate the endeavors of the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Julián Ventura Valero; the Director-General of Matías Romero Institute, Alejandro Alday González, and the Deputy Director-General for Liaison, Communications and Accountability, Liliana Padilla Rodríguez. We want to congratulate to IMR for its forty-five years of history.

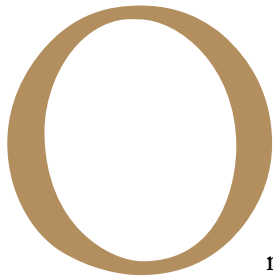
We would also like to express our gratitude to all the institutions that facilitated the research process: the Genaro Estrada Archives of Diplomatic History, the Bank of Mexico Historic Archive, the Center for Historical Studies at El Colegio de México, the Academic Department of International Studies at ITAM, the Fototeca Nacional and the National Coordination Office for Historic Monuments at the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

Finally, we are indebted to the IMR's Editorial Department, headed by María Constanza García Colomé, and to Gabriel López.

Graciela Márquez and Sergio Silva Castañeda



Introduction



On the afternoon of January 18, 1899, a large group of people gathered at the County Courthouse of Eagle Pass, a Texan town of no more than 2000 inhabitants on the border of Mexico and the United States. From here they made their way to the train station with officers of the local army garrison decked out in formal dress uniform and wearing black ribbons. As had been agreed the night before at an impromptu meeting of local dignitaries, at 5:00 p.m. a train could be seen approaching in the distance. In keeping with the established plan, at 5:05 p.m. the Eagle Pass Military Band struck up a funeral march. When the train pulled into the station, the corps of U.S. army volunteers stationed at the local camp presented arms in front of one of the cars, while 17 canon salutes could be heard ringing out from their camp located not far from the station. The remains of Matías Romero had arrived at the last town in the United States on their journey from Washington to Mexico City.

When the funeral car came to a halt, Francisco de Villasana, the Mexican consul in Eagle Pass, headed a committee of local authorities that had formed to pay their last respects to Romero. Among them was the local customs administrator, the commander of the army camp and the county judge. The committee then proceeded to board the car transporting Romero's corpse and mounted a guard of honor, while 12 army sergeants mounted guard behind and in front of it. All those present were dressed in black, the U.S. flags had been lowered to half-mast and all the stores and businesses had been closed since 4:30 p.m. and remained closed until the funeral cortege left U.S. territory. At 5:30 p.m., the train chugged off again toward the border accompanied by the entire committee, including military men, government officials and the Mexican consul. On the border, the county judge, a Mr. Kelso, gave a speech and handed over custody of the body to the commission that had been formed for this purpose on the other side of the border, in the city of Porfirio Díaz

(this was the name of Piedras Negras by between 1888 and 1911).¹

This was the last tribute paid to the famous Mexican diplomat on U.S. soil, in a town far from both capitals where a small garrison of the same army that had invaded Mexico during Romero's childhood guarded a border that, at the time, bore more resemblance to what we would today call a *frontier*. In his report to the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE), Villasana said that "never before had a public ceremony as impressive or as solemn taken place on this border."² Nearly half a century after the war, relations between Mexico and the United States had changed radically and for 40 years Matías Romero was a key player in this process. His influence clearly did not go unnoticed by the inhabitants of these two small border towns who had met and arranged to pay tribute to him in just a few short hours.

Yet these were not the only honors Matías Romero received in the United States. Two weeks prior to this, on January 1, 1899, his official funeral had been held in Washington, D.C. The ceremony was attended by President William McKinley and his wife, Vice-president Garret Hobart, several cabinet members, high-ranking U.S. army and navy officers, members of the Supreme Court and the diplomatic corps of Mexico accredited in

Washington, along with a few old friends, like John W. Foster, former secretary of State and former U.S. minister to Mexico,³ who was close to Romero in his final days and who spent part of his time giving conferences on the diplomatic history of the United States, which Romero regularly attended. After Romero's death, Foster took a few minutes to pay tribute to the Mexican Diplomat at one of his conferences in January 1899:

If I should be called upon to characterize Senor Romero's successful life in one word, I should say it was *work*. [...] The lesson of his life is that every young man of fair endowments, who has a will to work and a patriotic zeal to serve his country and his race, has before him the same field of honor and success.⁴

These exceptional farewells evidence the importance of Matías Romero's work and the efficacy with which he carried out his commission of representing Mexico in Washington during turbulent times on both sides of the border. They were also a sign of the high esteem and respect he had earned over the course of four decades of intense diplomatic maneuvering. During his lengthy sojourn in Washington, Romero was an extraordinary foreign representative—aside from dean of the diplomatic corps and friend of former presidents, he was lead negotiator on several

¹ Francisco de Villasana to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, January 15, 1899, Genaro Estrada Archives of Diplomatic History (GEADH), LE-1038, ff. 251-261.

² *Idem*.

³ José F. Godoy to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, January 2, 1899, GEADH, LE-1038, ff. 150-152.

⁴ "A Tribute to Romero", *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1899, in GEADH, LE-1038, f. 272.



Bird's eye view of Eagle Pass, Maverick County, 1887.

agreements, but above all, he was the central node in an extensive network of contacts of all kinds that he used to promote the interests of the Mexican government. It should also be noted that the years during which he actively participated in Mexican politics, economics and especially diplomacy were equally extraordinary, encompassing as they did the Reform War, the U.S. occupation of Cuba, the organization of the First Pan-American Conference, the American Civil War and the French Intervention in Mexico, events that

built and consolidated what Eric Hobsbawm has dubbed the *age of empire*.⁵ It was in these waters so perilous to the sovereignty of the world's weaker nations that Romero had to defend Mexico's interests, precisely from the heart of an empire rapidly on the rise.

Matías Romero is, then, a crucial figure in Mexican history and an analysis of his diplomatic career offers insight into the complexi-

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London, Weinfeld & Nicolson, 1989).

ties of his times, not just of domestic politics in Mexico, in which he played a major role, but in terms of the consolidation of the Mexican State as part of the international community. A self-taught diplomat whose life holds invaluable lessons for all Mexican diplomats to come after him, he was the youngest of a generation of liberals from Oaxaca who transformed Mexico in the second half of the nineteenth century and became the most cosmopolitan Mexican of his age. As a diplomat, finance minister and even a businessman, he understood the ins and outs of the international system and its potential impact on his country. He represented Mexico in the United States, negotiated with the Vatican and the Chinese Empire, turned his hand to producing coffee, albeit unsuccessfully, and promoted the Pan-American movement. He was, in short, a Mexican with a global vision by mid-nineteenth-century standards.

This biographical sketch of Matías Romero focuses on his work as a diplomat and the role he played in other facets of his life thanks to his knowledge of the international system. By no means have we attempted to be exhaustive; instead we have selected certain passages from his diplomatic career we feel are relevant to this book. The result is a

mosaic as complex and diverse as the life he built for himself over the course of 61 years. From his large body of correspondence and official documents, complemented by secondary sources essential to an analysis of his age, we have revived the voice of Matías Romero and his interlocutors to reveal the contexts, personal relationships, tensions and twists and turns of history underscoring the major decisions that are part and parcel of the responsibilities of a high-ranking civil servant. In so doing, we hope to have contributed to a reflection on the period during which Romero served a country that was seeking out its place in a complex, changing world full of uncertainty.

Consequently, what we have compiled is a short study on the life of Matías Romero and the historical context in which he performed his diplomatic duties. Some of our sources are not referred to in the few existing, but nonetheless important, studies on Romero, so we have attempted to put them into the historical context, not just of Mexico, but of the United States, Guatemala and the international system of the late nineteenth century. Matías Romero was, in our view, a highly skilled statesman operating in an exceedingly complicated international scenario.

Oaxaca and its Institute of Sciences and the Arts: The Two Birthplaces of Romero

The city of Oaxaca, the birthplace of Matías Romero, was founded during the Novohispanic period. Political and ecclesiastical authorities settled here as part of a colonization process in which a large part of the indigenous population maintained control of their lands—a factor that goes a long way to explaining the collapse of the city’s economy decades before the War of Independence. Cochineal production, the main activity that connected Oaxaca to the Atlantic economy, began declining, slowly but inexorably, from the 1780s on, while the consolidation of *vales reales* or royal bonds, a type of paper currency, contributed to the decapitalization of the local elite. This was compounded by their inability to force the indigenous population to work on their haciendas because they had their own lands and were able to subsist independently, and because the forced labor system known as *repartimiento* was banned in this part of the country. The rebel movement and the reoccupation of Oaxaca by the royalists in 1814 further accentuated economic hardships⁶ and the city reached independence as the seat of a local elite in the full throes of economic decadence. Their days of glory were apparently in the past, but they clearly aspired to play a prominent role in the building of the new state.

During the first years of Mexico’s independence, this waning elite turned to education as a path to modernization.⁷ The state of Oaxaca was a region whose population was at once its main asset and a major liability. Although Oaxaca made up a substantial percentage of the country’s total population, in the eyes of the local elite the vast majority of its inhabitants were a “problem”

⁶ Brian Hamnett, “Dye Production, Food Supply, and the Laboring Population of Oaxaca, 1750-1820,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1971).

⁷ Annick Lempérière, “La formación de las elites liberales en el México del siglo XIX: Instituto de Ciencias y Artes del Estado de Oaxaca,” *Secuencia*, No. 30 (September-December, 1994): 62.



Front of Oaxaca Institute of Sciences and the Arts, 20th century.

because they were mainly indigenous peoples who had more autonomy than their counterparts in other states. In the absence of a lucrative export sector and facing more difficulties than other states when it came to putting the indigenous population to work in commercial agriculture, this elite placed its hopes on education, because they believed it would lead “Oaxaca along the path to modernity,” reflecting their “desire for the state to continue making its mark on national history.” Hence “the century long efforts Oaxaca made to modernize itself by means of education.”⁸

⁸ A. Lempérière, “La formación...”: 62.

In the 1820s, Oaxaca’s elite embraced the federal cause and not just politically—they even prepared their young people to take control of the new institutions that were to be set up under the federal republic. It was in this context that the Oaxaca Institute of Sciences and the Arts (OICA) was founded in 1826, not necessarily as a rival of the Conciliar Seminary, the only higher education institution in the state until then, but as a way of complementing the education of members of Oaxaca’s elite in a new political context.⁹ The OICA offered cours-

⁹ A. Lempérière, “La formación...”: 62.



View of Oaxaca Institute of Sciences and the Arts, 20th century.

es that had previously only been accessible to a handful of well-to-do locals that could afford to study in Mexico City. The OICA produced, for example, lawyers, who it was hoped would occupy these new political positions in the local congress, courts and government administration. As such, it should be understood as a consequence of the triumph—which we now know to have been fleeting—of the federalist project of 1824, one that reflected the faith of Oaxaca's elite in the power of education. And while the intention was not to compete directly with the Conciliar Seminary, the OICA constituted a secular higher education alternative

and soon became a bastion of local liberals who gradually came to fill its classrooms, chairs and administration.¹⁰

In 1832, during the federalist administration of Valentín Gómez Farías, the liberal experiment seemed to take root in Oaxaca with Ramón Ramírez de Aguilar as governor and the presence of one of the first OICA graduates—Benito Juárez—in the local congress. For example, this government

¹⁰ Víctor Raúl Martínez Vásquez, *Juárez y la Universidad de Oaxaca: breve historia del Instituto de Ciencias y Artes, y de la Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca* (Mexico, Senate of the Republic/Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, 2006): 26–27.

Exmo. Sr.

En el oficio de V. E., fecha de hoy, he
tenido la satisfacción de ver que el Exmo. Sr.
Presidente interino de la República, se dignó
nombrarme meritorio del Ministerio, y me
dignamente dirigió V. E., disponiéndome
mis servicios en la Sección de Europa.

Momentos honrado con la confianza
que V. E. ha tenido la bondad de depositar
en mí, llamándome a la primera Secretaría
de Estado, me apresuro a manifestar a V. E.
mi profundo reconocimiento por tal distin-
ción, y mi deseo sincero de corresponder a
ella, consagrándome en cuanto me sea po-
sible, al Servicio público, en las importantes
labores de este Ministerio.

Aprovecho esta oportunidad, para
ofrecer a V. E. las seguridades de mi mayor
consideración y profundo respeto.

Dios y Libertad.

México, Diciembre 1.º de 1855.

Natias Romero.

Exmo. Sr. Ministro de Relaciones
Exteriores.

promoted the vindication of the figure of Vicente Guerrero and certain measures to reduce the power of the Catholic Church in the state.¹¹ But despite Juárez's increasing influence in the local congress, the liberal party did not yet exist. Rather, there were isolated leaders that were forced to go on the defensive when the conservative government of Anastasio Bustamante took office in 1837 and the Seven Laws were promulgated in December 1836. Juárez left the local congress and its reforms were abrogated. Oaxaca's first liberal project, it seemed, had been defeated and its leaders either disappeared from public life or went back to their private affairs. Meanwhile, the OICA faced persecution from Mexico City: its budget was cut and several chairs failed to receive approval and were closed.¹² It was in the midst of this liberal retreat that Matías Romero was born in 1837.

Oaxaca of the 1830s was clearly embroiled in an ideological dispute, but this did not prevent the defeated liberals from gradually entering local institutions as of 1838. This was because their differences were relatively insignificant compared to the more serious controversies that were looming on the horizon. By 1842, the state governor was Antonio de León, a former military royalist who supported Santa Anna in 1823, but who, like the caudillo, gradually came to adopt the centralist agenda. Under De León, Juárez once again occupied top posi-

tions in the local public administration and the OICA recouped lost ground. In 1845, the institution overhauled its study plan and began accepting students as young as 12 as part of its secondary school program. This reform enabled Matías Romero to enter the OICA in 1848, at a time when a foreign invasion was tearing the country apart.¹³

Aside from a loss of territory, the 1846-1847 invasion had serious political consequences for Mexico in general and Oaxaca in particular. Antonio de León lost his life in the Battle of Molino del Rey, which, together with the restoration of federalism in October 1847, opened the doors of the state governorship to Benito Juárez. Although he did not manage to secure control of his government until 1849, his administration, which ended in 1852, marked the return of old-school Oaxaca federalists to power. As was to be expected, these men had learned from their mistakes and this time around had a clearer project of a much more liberal bent. They were the same men, but with much more political experience.¹⁴ Matías Romero entered the OICA when Juárez was governor and Porfirio Díaz a professor at the Institute. He graduated from his first studies in 1851, a couple of years before the generation of young liberals who governed Oaxaca and that were his mentors became prominent national figures in the battle against Santa Anna during the Revolution of Ayutla.

¹¹ B. Hamnett, *Juárez* (New York, Longman, 1994): 24-26.

¹² A. Lemperière, "La formación...": 76.

¹³ Harry Bernstein, *Matías Romero, 1837-1898* (Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973): 10.

¹⁴ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 33-35.

In 1854, the liberals of Oaxaca and other local elites joined the battle initiated by Juan Álvarez in Guerrero. Upon their victory, a group of them, spearheaded by former governor Juárez, undertook the task of rebuilding the country based on federal and liberal ideals antagonistic to the clerical conservatism Lucas Alamán and his political heirs had turned into a political party.

When Juárez took office as minister of Justice and Public Education under interim president Juan Álvarez, Matías Romero was a young graduate of the OICA with potential, but also a great deal of ambition. Romero arrived in Mexico City in 1855 and soon after received his first government appointment: on December 1, 1855, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Manuel María Arriola informed him that President Álvarez had designated him an “unpaid intern” of the ministry and had assigned him to the Europe section. Romero, who was just 18 at the time, replied very soberly:

I am deeply honored at the trust that Y.E. has had the consideration to place in me by calling me to the first State Secretary and I would like to express to Y.E. my deepest appreciation for such a distinction and my most sincere desire to live up to it by devoting myself as soon as possible to public service in the important work of this Ministry.¹⁵

¹⁵ Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, December 1, 1855, GEADH, LE-1038, f. 4.

The president and the foreign minister who initially hired Romero were to leave their posts ten days later, but Romero was to work for the ministry for most of the next four decades.

Matías Romero formed part of a generation of liberals from Oaxaca that came to power led by Juárez, but whose influence would not become entirely evident until more than half a century later. Yet it should be noted that Romero represented the tail end of this generation: he did not belong to the generation of Juárez and Ignacio Mejía, born between 1806 and 1814, nor did he belong to that of Díaz and Ignacio Mariscal, born in 1830 and 1829, respectively. In 1855, when he was appointed an intern at the SRE, Mejía and Juárez were already seasoned politicians and had governed Oaxaca when Romero was studying at the OICA. After the Revolution of Ayutla, both became important figures in the governments that emerged from the conflict and would continue to play prominent roles during the second half of the 1850s: one became president and the other rose to the rank of general during the Reform War. As for Díaz and Mariscal, they were not that much older than Romero, but even so, by the mid-1850s both were engaged in more important matters. Mariscal participated as a constituent of congress in 1857 and accompanied Juárez in the Reform War, while Díaz played a leading role in Oaxaca during the Revolution of Ayutla and

fought under Mejía in the Reform War. Meanwhile, Romero spent these same years as a volunteer in the liberal army, and an unpaid intern, clerk and fifth secretary in the SRE of a peripatetic government.

Still, he understood that his proximity to this nucleus of eminent liberals from Oaxaca gave a man of his tender years a considerable advantage over his peers, so

when he arrived in Mexico City he had one goal in mind: to join the administration of his mentors. His age, however, would not be the only thing to set him apart—from the outset he exhibited a keen interest in international affairs, reason why he had his sights set on the SRE.¹⁶

¹⁶ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 13-15.



War and Diplomacy, 1857-1867

Matías Romero's appointment as an intern came just days after his arrival in Mexico City, which can be credited to Juárez's influence. However, for two years his position at the SRE would be completely inconsequential and unpaid. During these two years, his life was that of a young man with ambition who had not yet found his bearings in the intricate bureaucratic circles of Mexico City. When he was off the clock, he would spend his time studying law, writing his first book on Mexico's international treaties and strategizing to get promoted, preferably to the London legation. As Harry Bernstein puts it, these were not the best of times for Romero.¹⁷

Things began to change in 1857, for obvious reasons. In the absence of Benito Juárez, who had returned to Oaxaca to assume office as governor, Romero continued to try and work his way up the ladder and get the SRE to publish his study on international treaties—all to no avail. Neither Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada nor Lucas de Palacio, who headed the ministry at the time, paid much attention to this young man from Oaxaca who had not yet developed the gift for empathizing with others that would later serve him so well in his career as a diplomat.¹⁸ Bernstein suggests that Romero lost all hope of Juárez being able to help him get a foot up at the ministry while he was gone from Mexico City, but Brian Hamnett says the two men stayed in touch the whole time. Romero would keep Juárez posted as to what was happening in the capital and at the SRE, where, it should be remembered, he had a job because Juárez had put in a good word for him. So when Juárez stepped down as governor of Oaxaca to rejoin the cabinet of President Ignacio Comonfort, Romero knew for certain he

¹⁷ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 16-23.

¹⁸ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 16-23.



The Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Risco in the middle of the 19th century.

had regained an important and influential ally in the capital.¹⁹

As of this moment, history smiled on Matías Romero, whose life as a bureaucrat was about to take a more interesting turn. On December 17, 1857, President Comonfort ordered that congress be dissolved and his cabinet members arrested, among them Juárez. Meanwhile, a group of military men led by Félix María Zuloaga were planning to get rid of Comonfort too. Moments before he resigned, Comonfort ordered that Juárez be released, but Juárez, unawares of the coup,

had declared himself interim president, and so began the Reform War.

According to Bernstein, the outbreak of the war put paid to Romero's "personal ambitions", whose allegiance to the liberal cause he attributes merely to a sense of personal loyalty to Juárez.²⁰ Yet these two statements require further comment.

Firstly, it is unlikely the war affected Romero's personal ambitions because by this time he was well aware that his only chance of climbing up the ladder was by Juárez's side. Clearly, in a situation of complete po-

¹⁹ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 75.

²⁰ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 31.



View of the Cathedral and the National Palace, Mexico City, *ca.* 1845.

litical uncertainty, he had to make a decision: either he continue to lead a comfortable bureaucratic life or he follow Juárez and other liberals on an adventure whose outcome could not be predicted. In the mind of the ambitious young Romero, continuing down the bureaucratic path without the support of Juárez and his followers was not an option, while following their itinerant government would allow him to get even closer to his mentor and other liberals like Melchor Ocampo. It is not likely Romero's reasoning was so clear-cut, but the futility of staying behind in a Mexico City ruled by the conservatives must have been obvious to him. There can be

no denying following Juárez was risky, but the alternative was a dead-end alley.

Secondly, Bernstein unfairly accuses the young Romero of a degree of ideological ambiguity, due mainly to the fact that he regularly attended mass while in Mexico City and even during the months he accompanied Juárez's first peripatetic administration. This seems to have led Bernstein to conclude that Romero was not ideologically committed to the liberal cause, but that his ties to it boiled down to a sense of personal loyalty to Juárez. The truth is Romero was not the only one to exhibit this ambiguity—most liberals of his day were Catholic and the only thing

that differentiated them from the conservatives was their view on the place of the Catholic Church in the new State that was being forged. The motto that appears on the documents signed by Romero and other liberals sheds light on the ideological evolution of their wartime liberalism. On arriving in Mexico City in 1855 and up until 1859, the official documents signed by Matías Romero bore the motto “God and Liberty”, which was common among OICA graduates. By 1862, this had changed to “God, Liberty and Reform” and a year later it had been reduced to “Liberty and Reform.” Mexican liberalism of the mid-nineteenth century was born among Catholics—because otherwise it would never have seen the light of day—and evolved during the war years. In this regard, Romero may have behaved differently to Juárez or Ocampo, but probably acted no differently to the average liberal of his day.

In any case, Romero left the comfort of Mexico City to follow Juárez to Guanajuato, where, in February 1858, his mentor got him what he himself had not been able to achieve in the capital: a paid position at the SRE under Melchor Ocampo. Between February 1858 and December 1859, Romero would form part of Juárez’s itinerant government, working shoulder-to-shoulder with Ocampo and rising rapidly up the hierarchy—something that would have been hard to picture in times of peace. Bernstein’s version of the sequence of promotions he received during the first part of the Reform War differs to what Romero himself would

recall three decades later, but only slightly.²¹ In both cases, he went from clerk on arriving in Guanajuato to sixth secretary and then to fifth and second officer in less than a year. Meanwhile, the government moved from Guanajuato to Guadalajara, and then from Colima to Veracruz. In response to his appointment as second officer, Romero stated that it was his “firm intention to do everything in my power to serve the cause that defends the supreme constitutional government, so as not to be unworthy of the trust that has been placed in me.”²² The war most certainly helped him climb a few rungs on the bureaucratic ladder.

But the young Romero was not invulnerable to the tensions and rivalries within the Juárez government in Veracruz. Juárez and Ocampo refused to negotiate a way out of the conflict, while Lerdo and others believed the liberal faction’s only options were a U.S. intervention that would quash the conservative party or a negotiation that would allow them to at least partially rescue the liberal program.²³ It is hard to know what exactly Romero’s opinion was in these months. What we do know is that he remained inseparable from Ocampo—in August 1859, when Ocampo left the SRE, Romero was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior so he could continue working in close quarters with his new mentor. Despite the disputes,

²¹ Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, March 31, 1887, GEADH, LE-1039, ff. 73-76.

²² Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 1859, GEADH, LE-1038, f. 10.

²³ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 121-123.

Como Sr.

El oficio que V. me hizo la honra de dirigirme con fecha de ayer, me ha impuesto de que el E. S. Presidente Constitucional de la República, se sirva nombrarme oficial segundo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.

Altamente honrado con esa prueba de bondad del primer Magistrado de la Nación, no menor que con las benévolas calificaciones que V. hace de mis servicios, me creo obligado a manifestar a V. para que, como se lo suplico, se digna elevarlo al conocimiento del E. S. Presidente, mi profunda gratitud por tan señalada muestra de distinción, y mi propósito firme de hacer cuanto me fuere posible en servicio de la causa que defiende el Supremo Gobierno Constitucional, por no desmerecer la confianza que en mí se ha depositado. Esta oportunidad me proporciona la satisfacción de registrar a V. las seguridades de mi atenta y respetuosa consideración.

Dios y Libertad. M. Valencia, Enero 30 de 1858.

M. Romero

E. S. Ministro de Gobernación,
Encargado de la Secretaría de
Relaciones Exteriores.

Private

Romero put his nose to the grindstone in Veracruz and for the first time came into direct contact with representatives of the U.S. government at a key moment in Mexican history. During these months in Veracruz, the country's most important port, he had a front seat to the spectacle of national politics at play, namely the foreign policy of a government with its back against the wall.

During the Reform War, the Juárez administration's relationship with the United States was crucial. A rising power that had invaded Mexico barely a decade previously and appropriated a large chunk of its territory, the liberals were nevertheless forced to focus their efforts on relations with the United States in the face of intimidation from European powers. According to Hamnett, in 1859 Juárez and Ocampo were convinced differences between the northern and southern factions of the Democratic Party in the United States would cause a schism in its rank and file and that the newly formed Republican Party would come to power the following year.²⁴ The Republican Party was a mixed northern alliance whose members included former Whigs and others whose main rallying point was opposition to the expansion of the slave system in the South. A considerable number of Whigs had opposed the war in Mexico ten years previously, precisely because they did not want to see slavery spread in the South, a fact Juárez and Ocampo were no doubt aware of. The

Whig Party disintegrated after the 1852 election, mainly because the North perceived the 1850 agreement—which aimed to resolve the latent conflict over the potential expansion of the slave system in the United States—as capitulation by the party's leadership to the South's pro-slavery elite. The Republican Party filled the gap left by the Whigs and by the time the 1856 election came around, it was the party with the second-most votes. Since 1856 both republicans and democrats had known that the Republican Party stood a good chance of winning in 1860, so it was a possibility Juárez and Ocampo surely considered.

But when Juárez and his followers set up their government in Veracruz in May 1858, there were still two and a half years to go until the next election in the United States, meaning it was simply not feasible to wait. Confined to the port of Veracruz, the liberals desperately needed the recognition of the United States and they were determined to get it. The only other alternative was to negotiate with the democratic government of James Buchanan, knowing full well that it represented pro-slavery and expansionist interests.

In 1858, even an inexperienced Mexican politician could have guessed what the United States would demand in return for acknowledging the Juárez government: the ceding of territory, the granting of rights of passage, the payment of compensation for damage to the property of U.S. citizens and the annulment, or at the very least the waiving of the enforcement of article 11 of the

²⁴ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 150-151.

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.²⁵ Surrounded by Miguel Miramón's troops on land and with European fleets gathering off the port of Veracruz, Juárez, Ocampo and a young Romero held very few cards, yet had no choice but to negotiate.

By the summer of 1858, the United States had lost all hope of reaching an agreement with Zuloaga's conservative government. The U.S. minister in Mexico City, John Forsyth, had already proposed a treaty under which Mexico would cede Baja California and other northern territories, as well as a trade route through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and in exchange would provide the conservatives with financial assistance. But while the liberals sought to negotiate with the United States, the conservatives opted to negotiate the financial and military support of the Spanish Crown. In December 1858, U.S. diplomatic staff still in Mexico sent back reports on how the number of British, Spanish and French ships in the port of Veracruz was growing by the day, the purpose of these expeditions, they claimed, being to intimidate and overthrow the Juárez government. Between December 1858 and April 1859, President Buchanan received updates on the situation in Mexico, some of which argued as to the illegitimacy of the conservative government and pointed to Juárez's ideological

affinity with the political institutions of the United States. These reports also stated that Juárez might be willing to make major concessions, including the ceding of territory, in exchange for financial support and the recognition of his government, while the risk of a British occupation of the port of Veracruz would close off all avenues of negotiation.²⁶

Eager to exploit the opportunity to negotiate with a government on its last legs, on April 1, 1859, Robert M. McLane traveled to Veracruz to determine whether or not the Juárez government should be recognized. He had also been conferred the power to grant such recognition.²⁷ On April 6, McLane officially recognized the liberal government at a formal ceremony at the Veracruz town hall and negotiations got underway.²⁸ The United States, represented by McLane, was willing to extend the Juárez government credit, but only if it guaranteed payment with the cession of territories. McLane had even been authorized to pay 10 million dollars for the cession of Baja California. The U.S. government was also interested in securing rights of passage for its citizens through Mexico, particularly via the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Sonora too.

²⁵ That article held the United States Government responsible for possible incursions by Native American tribes into Mexican territory. See Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008).

²⁶ These consular reports are cited in Edward J. Berbusse, "The Origins of the McLane-Ocampo Treaty of 1859", *The Americas*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1958): 223-245.

²⁷ See H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 37-40; E. J. Berbusse, "The Origins of the McLane-Ocampo Treaty": 230-232, and B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 149-152.

²⁸ An account of the time on this process of recognition of the Government of Juárez can be found at Edward E. Dunbar, *The Mexican Papers, The Mexican Question, The Great American Question, with Personal Reminiscences* (New York, J. A. H. Hasbrouck & Co. [First Series, no. 1], 1860): 7.

The negotiations took months and all the while, pressure on the Juárez government in Veracruz mounted. As Miramón laid siege to the city on land, European fleets continued to gather at the port. Paradoxically, this pressure served to improve Juárez's bargaining power: realizing Juárez could be overthrown and that any concessions would be worthless, the United States paired back its territorial demands and in exchange for assistance and its recognition of the liberal government, asked only for rights of passage through Tehuantepec. On signing the McLane-Ocampo Treaty, Juárez and his government forged a defensive alliance that enabled them to survive at a relatively low price.²⁹ As Hamnett so rightly says, in Juárez's view, the alternative to ceding these rights of passage was the restoration of a monarchy in Mexico. The agreement allowed the United States to protect transit through Tehuantepec, but only at the specific request of the Mexican government. Signed on December 14, 1859 in Veracruz, it was no mean feat. According to Hamnett, Juárez and Ocampo managed to avert direct intervention in Mexico by the United States and the loss of more territory. Likewise, in April 1860, the liberal government upheld the republican project and secured the support of the U.S. Navy when Miramón hired Spanish ships in Cuba to launch a third siege on Veracruz in 1860, even though the treaty was still being debated in the U.S. senate and would not be ratified. More importantly,

Juárez and Ocampo managed to obtain the recognition of the United States at one of the worst moments of the Reform War and without making the concessions the U.S. government had hoped for.³⁰ Romero participated in these negotiations with Ocampo and had the opportunity to deal directly with McLane and his entourage, mainly because he spoke fluent English.³¹

It is hard to tell exactly what role Matías Romero played in these talks. At the time he was a young man of just 22 who suddenly found himself involved in what were, up until then, the most delicate international negotiations ever for Mexico's future. Yet there is evidence to suggest he was more than a mere bystander. For one, a couple of weeks before the signing of the agreement, Ocampo had ordered him to go to Washington, where he would work with José María Mata from the Mexican legation in the United States. His main mission was to assist Mata by following up on the ratification of the agreement in the U.S. senate. Clearly, he had been commissioned with a task of enormous importance to the Juárez government back in Veracruz. Also, during these conversations Romero made contact with other U.S. citizens with whom he forged lasting ties, including the diplomat Henry Roy de la Rentre and the businessman Edward E. Dunbar. An out-and-out champion of the Juárez cause, Dunbar clearly stated his goal

²⁹ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 151.

³⁰ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 151-152.

³¹ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 37-40.

in the very first issue of the *Mexican Papers* he published in New York on his return to the United States:

To draw the attention of the mercantile and industrial classes in the United States, to the national importance of the Mexican question; and to place before them information respecting Mexico, her people and her institutions, with the view of correcting public opinion on some highly important points, which, in my judgement, are entirely ignored, or thoroughly misconceived.³²

A few years later, Romero would introduce Dunbar to Abraham Lincoln in an effort to put voices sympathetic to Mexico within ear's reach of the U.S. government.³³

On December 10, 1859, Romero left Veracruz for Washington to carry out Ocampo's orders. He arrived 14 days later and had a complicated first few weeks. Bernstein gives a detailed account of his trip and his impressions, his difficulties understanding the language and his encounter with the harsh Washington winter. Initially, he tried to lobby for the approval of the McLane-Ocampo Treaty, but soon realized congress was deeply divided by conflicting economic interests: rail workers from New York represented by Republican senators were pitted against the shipping interests of New Orleans represented by the Democrats. He spent virtually the first half of 1860 attending debates on the

treaty and when his efforts failed, he began studying the U.S. political system in an attempt to understand it better. Between May and August of that same year, he traveled the length and breadth of the United States, until Mata returned to Mexico and he was appointed chargé d'affaires a.i. for the Mexican legation. This was the first time he had headed a Mexican diplomatic representation in the United States. He was just 23.³⁴

During his time with the legation, Romero witnessed some of the most complicated months in the history of the United States. Between April 23 and May 3, 1860, the Democratic Party held a convention to elect its presidential candidate. After more than 50 rounds of voting, the party was unable to pick a candidate, even though 50 delegates from the South had left the convention before the first round of voting in protest at the adoption of an electoral platform they did not believe to be sufficiently pro-slavery. Another meeting was held on June 18 in Baltimore and Stephen Douglas—a democrat from the North who had defeated Lincoln a few years earlier in the Illinois senate elections—was finally selected as the party's presidential choice. Days later, the Southern delegations that had walked out held their own convention, at which they nominated Vice-president John Breckinridge as their candidate. Meanwhile, the Republicans held their convention in May of that same year, which was not without its surprises: Lincoln

³² E. Dunbar, *The Mexican Papers*: 1.

³³ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 78.

³⁴ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 42-57.

Relaciones

17

254

El E. S. Presidente que
al nombrar a V. Sr. de la Lega-
ción en Washington quisiera
que fuese sin perjuicio del
empléo que le correspondía en
el Ministerio de Relaciones,
se ha servido nombrarla V. Sr.
de la Sección de América
en dho Ministerio para que
si le fuese a V. preciso retirar-
se de la Legación vuelva a esta
Secretaría a continuar sus bre-
ves servicios.

Quiero a V. con tal mo-
tivo mi aprecio y consideración.

Y Libertad R. F. Cruz Di-
ciembre 20 de 1859.

Ucampo

R. Lic. D. M. Romero }
Sr. de la Legación en }

Washington

was nominated presidential candidate, even though the odds favored New York senator William Seward, who was the main opponent of the McLane-Ocampo Treaty. At the November 6 elections, the Republican candidate won more than half the votes, even though he was unknown in most southern states, while the Democratic candidate Douglas, the only one with a national presence, got fewer votes than Breckinridge, despite having obtained a higher percentage of the popular vote. These political divisions soon led to the outbreak of civil war in the United States.

On December 20, 1860, a few weeks after Lincoln's electoral victory, South Carolina announced its secession from the Union. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas followed suit. As cracks began to show in the Union, Romero received orders from Mexico: he was to travel to Springfield, Illinois, to deliver a message from Juárez to president elect Abraham Lincoln, but he was to tell no one in Washington about his mission so as not to offend the democratic administration still in office.³⁵ Romero describes this first interview in his diary:

I told him the purpose of my trip and read him the note from the Foreign Ministry asking me to do so. I then told him that the only reason for the revolutions in Mexico was that the clergy and the army were opposed to all constitutions because they wanted to retain the privileges and influences they had enjoyed during the colonial

regime, but that now they had been completely overpowered there was well-founded hope Mexico would enjoy peace and prosperity. He replied that during his administration he would attempt to do everything in his power to further Mexico's interests, that he would see justice was done us in every instance and that we would be considered an ally and sister nation. He added that he did not think anything could make him change his mind in this regard. He asked me for a copy in English of the note from the Foreign Ministry I had read and said he would report back to me in writing.

I then told him Mexico applauded the victory of the Republican Party because it hoped the party's policies would be more loyal and friendlier, not like those of the Democrats, which were essentially about taking Mexico's territories from it to expand slavery.

He asked me about working conditions in Mexico, for he had heard laborers lived in total slavery, and was very pleased when I told him abuses had been reported in only a few places and that these were against the law. He also asked me how many inhabitants Mexico City had and was pleasantly surprised when I told him, because he had thought it very small. We talked about the appointment of Mr. Seward to Secretary of State and other things. He spoke out categorically against slavery.³⁶

As Hamnett indicates, Romero and Juárez both knew they would have the sympathy of the republican government, but they also knew they had to learn to exploit that sympathy.³⁷

³⁵ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 60.

³⁶ Cited in H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 63.

³⁷ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 153.

The important thing was that there was cause for optimism. Regardless of whatever good will Mexico could garner among members of Lincoln's republican government, Romero viewed the military victory of the North in the Civil War as the best possible scenario for Mexico's future as a sovereign country. According to Bernstein, this was because he understood that the development model the North ascribed to was intrinsically less dangerous to Mexico's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While the slave system the Southern states of the Confederacy backed could only sustain growth by incorporating new territories to expand its cotton-based economy, the industrial development model of the Northern states was more inclined to seek out new consumer and investment markets. And with the Northern states grouped in the Union, economic ties could be established without these posing a threat to Mexico's territorial integrity. Furthermore, as representatives of the Northern elite, the Republicans had their own political reasons for opposing the expansion of slavery. Consequently, Romero and Juárez were confident they could exploit this division to Mexico's advantage.³⁸

Nevertheless, during the American Civil War and the French Intervention in Mexico there were times when Juárez, and especially Romero, doubted Lincoln and Seward's real intentions toward Mexico. It was not so much an ideological issue as one of realpolitik: the U.S. president could not trans-

late his good intentions into direct support for Mexico in the face of French aggression because a few weeks later, Lincoln and Seward's government found itself caught up in its own civil war and, under such circumstances, was not prepared to jeopardize its relations with the French Empire. Although Lincoln considered his relationship with the Juárez government "the most interesting and important one within the whole circle of our international relations",³⁹ the reality was that Romero paid his dues as a Mexican diplomat in Washington during the most complex moment in the history of nineteenth-century relations between Mexico and the United States, with the obvious exception of the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War.

Internal documents confirm the Lincoln government's good will toward Mexico, at least initially. On April 6, 1861, Seward sent a message to his minister in Mexico, Thomas Corwin, saying he was gratified the liberals had won the Reform War, but he also mentioned several matters that concerned him, namely the Juárez government's apparent lack of authority and inability to maintain order. He was particularly worried about unconfirmed reports concerning the murder of a member of the former U.S. legation in

³⁸ See H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 129.

³⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Mexico. Mr. Seward to Mr. Corwin, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1861," *Message of the President of the United States to The Two Houses of Congress, at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress. Volume I* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1861): 67, available in University Wisconsin Digital Collections-Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1861v01> (Accessed: August 23, 2018).

Mexico and also referred to multiple suits and complaints against the Mexican government he had discovered in the files of the State Department on taking office, including incidents of breaches of contract, theft and acts of cruelty against U.S. citizens. Seward made it clear these issues needed to be duly investigated and that the claims would not be filed until the Juárez government had established its authority.⁴⁰

Even more interesting is the stance the fledgling Lincoln-Seward administration took toward Mexico, which seemed to coincide with how Juárez and Romero had expected the Republican Party to react. In the same message, Seward informed his minister in Mexico that:

Taking into view the actual condition and circumstances of Mexico, as well as those of the United States, the President is fully satisfied that que safety, welfare, and happiness of the latter would be more effectually promoted if the former should retain its complete integrity and independence, than they could be by any dismemberment of Mexico, with a transfer or diminution of its sovereignty, even though thereby a portion or the whole of the country or its sovereignty should be transferred to the United States themselves.⁴¹

In principle, Seward seemed more worried about the impact the internal conflict in the

United States would have on relations with Mexico than the latter's history of political instability. He also understood that, given the political situation of his country in April 1861, Mexico would play a determining role in the success of the Union government:

The success of this government in conducting affairs to that consummation [the Union preservation] may depend in some small degree on the action of the government and people of Mexico in this new emergency. The President could not fail to see that Mexico, instead of being benefited by the prostration or the obstruction of federal authority in this country, would be exposed by it to new and fearful dangers. On the other hand, a condition of anarchy in Mexico must necessarily operate as a seduction to those who are conspiring against the integrity of the Union to seek strength and aggrandizement for themselves by conquest in Mexico and other parts of Spanish America.⁴²

On June 29, 1861, Corwin replied to Seward confirming that the Mexican government viewed the United States as its only reliable ally and that Juárez and his cabinet were aware how dangerous it would be for Mexico if the conflict in the United States were not to end favorably for the Union.⁴³

Reality, however, would soon begin to drive a wedge between the two governments.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Mexico. Mr. Seward to Mr. Corwin".

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, "Mexico. Mr. Seward to Mr. Corwin".

⁴² U.S. Department of State, "Mexico. Mr. Seward to Mr. Corwin": 66

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, "Mexico. Mr. Seward to Mr. Corwin": 69.



View of Veracruz City, ca. 1850.

Six days after Seward's original missive to Corwin, Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter, marking the beginning of the American Civil War. The immediate upshot for Mexico was that the Juárez government lost all hope of obtaining a credit line to settle its debts with its European lenders and mitigate the risk of an invasion. Three months after the Civil War broke out, Juárez announced a suspension of payments that would result in the signing of the Convention of London in October 1861 and, eventually, a French invasion of Mexico. The financial difficulties of the Juárez government made life impossible for Romero in Washington, to the point where he finally handed in his resignation in September

1861, arguing that he simply did not have the means to continue his work.⁴⁴

Throughout 1861, the United States made it clear that it had no interest in competing with European powers in America, preferring to invoke the Washington Doctrine or caution against entangling alliances (which was actually outlined by Thomas Jefferson) over the Monroe Doctrine, which proscribed European intervention in the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁵ Seward's reluctance to jeopardize U.S.-French relations during the Civil War complicated the work of Romero, who, in his capacity as Mexican chargé d'affaires to

⁴⁴ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 75-76.

⁴⁵ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 154.

the United States, was forced to write to Seward on several occasions between late 1861 and early 1862 about several matters that gradually came to put a strain on the bilateral relationship. One of these was the rumor that Mexicans in the United States were being forcibly recruited by both the Union and Confederate armies. Another was the presence of ships flying the Confederacy or U.S. flag in Mexican ports, but his most frequent complaint, given what seemed the inevitable invasion of Mexico by European powers, was that the French were purchasing weapons and equipment in the United States.⁴⁶ According to Bernstein, Romero not only corresponded, but spoke frequently with Seward, and also with Montgomery Blair, the postmaster general, which, at the time, was a cabinet position, and Charles Sumner, an influential senator for the state of Massachusetts. The young diplomat did everything he could to champion Mexico's cause, including relaying to Lincoln the opinions of men like Edward Dunbar, who Romero knew to be pro-Mexico, and lobbying members of congress and influential dailies to round up support for Mexico. When necessary, he would person-

ally respond to articles published in *The New York Times* and the *New York Tribune* that were critical of the Mexican government.

According to Hamnett, by late 1861 Juárez was convinced nothing could be expected of the United States, which had already acknowledged the right of European powers to intervene in Mexico to guarantee loan repayments.⁴⁷ Romero, too, it seems, had lost faith. When a French intervention appeared inevitable, he once again tried to resign, this time arguing that he wanted to return to Mexico to fight as a simple soldier. Juárez once again asked him stay put.⁴⁸ And when French troops finally invaded Mexico, Romero could not have been more devastated: he had managed to round up valuable support in the U.S. congress, but had failed to do so in the executive branch, hence his disappointment.⁴⁹ On October 29, 1862, he once again wrote to his superiors in Mexico requesting he be sent back home because he no longer saw any point to his work in Washington: "But now I am convinced we can expect nothing from here as long as the current civil war lasts and that we will have resolved our own affairs, for better or for worse, before this country is able to resolve its."⁵⁰

In March 1863, as the French army marched on Puebla again, Corwin reported from Mexico City that both Romero and the rest of the Mexican government were disgruntled with the United States. By the time

⁴⁶ See U.S. Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress, at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress. Volume I* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1861), available in FRUS: <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1861v01> (Accessed: August 23, 2018); *Message of the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the Third Session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress. Volume I* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1862), available in FRUS: <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1862v01> (Accessed: August 23, 2018).

⁴⁷ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 155.

⁴⁸ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 75-77.

⁴⁹ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 79.

⁵⁰ See H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 89.

of Corwin's report, there were no representatives of any European government in Mexico and on leaving Mexico City, the Prussian minister asked Corwin to ensure all Belgians, French, Spaniards and Prussians in Mexico were provided with consular protection. The Mexican government told Corwin it did not look well on this request, because no citizen of these European countries was at risk.⁵¹

It was amidst mounting tensions that Romero wrote to Seward asking that the U.S. government explain its alleged invitation to European forces to join U.S. ones in Panama to protect transit across the Isthmus. At one point in his letter, he states:

The fate of the nations of America are bound together in such a manner that if the encroachments of the despots of Europe should succeed in one of them, it would scarcely be possible to prevent their being extended to all of them. Upon this subject the opinion of the government of Mexico is in full accord with the traditional policy of the United States.⁵²

Romero proceeded to argue that the actions of the United States could provoke a European invasion of Panama and reminded Seward that his own government was being forced to defend itself against European ag-

gressors at that very moment in time. Seward immediately replied, assuring Romero that his country was most certainly not inviting European powers to "cooperate" in the protection of the Isthmus of Panama and saying he was pleased their two countries shared the same criteria. Romero thanked Seward for replying and apologized for any misunderstanding. What is interesting here is the diplomatic skill a 26-year-old Matías Romero displayed in this apparently simple exchange: without explicitly mentioning it, Romero invoked the Monroe Doctrine in an issue that, while it did not directly concern Mexico, had obvious implications for the situation in his own country—a fact he subtly reminded Seward of.

Finally, in June 1863, Romero left the United States for Mexico. He arrived in Tampico on the 14th and immediately headed for San Luis Potosí, where the Juárez government had moved. He joined the army and was sent to Acámbaro, where he reencountered Porfirio Díaz. For a few weeks, he served under Díaz as chief of staff, but the experience and knowledge he had acquired during his almost four years in Washington made him difficult to replace for a government in such a precarious situation and so, in September 1863, just a couple of months later, Juárez asked him to return, this time in the official capacity of special envoy and minister plenipotentiary of Mexico in the United States. Ignacio Mariscal agreed to accompany him as secretary of the Mexican legation, which is an indicator of just how much respect the

⁵¹ U.S. Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States, and Accompanying Documents, to The Two Houses of Congress, at the Commencement of the First Session of the Thirty-Eighth Congress. Part II* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1863), available in FRUS: <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1863p2> (Accessed: August 23, 2018).

⁵² U.S. Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States*: 1247.

young Romero had earned among members of Juárez's cabinet. Eight years Romero's elder, Mariscal himself had garnered a great deal of prestige as a member of the Constituent Congress of 1857 and as Juárez's legal advisor. Nonetheless, he agreed to travel to the United States as Romero's subordinate on what was to be the start of a long-lasting working relationship between the two men that ended only with Romero's sudden death in 1898.

During this second sojourn in Washington, Romero focused more on fostering his contacts and relations beyond the executive branch of government. He organized political events to pressure Lincoln and Seward, took advantage of his ties with congressmen like Schuyler Colfax and Thaddeus Stevens to promote the Mexican cause and, according to Bernstein, even began to put to U.S. politicians the idea of creating an American Continental Association to complement the Monroe Doctrine.⁵³ In December 1863, Romero used his contacts in New York, Seward's home state, to put pressure on the Lincoln government and get more exposure for the Mexican cause. On December 16, he attended a dinner with New York politicians and business leaders, where he gave a speech on the history of Mexico's internal conflicts. His goal was not to convince them that Juárez's battle against the French Empire was a righteous cause—better yet, he argued that the causes of the Union and Juárez were one and the same, even if the U.S. government did not see it that way:

The French army did not retire from Mexico, with the armies of England and of Spain, for the French Government had other objects in view, and it was fully determined to accomplish them. The Emperor of the French believed at that time, and perhaps he still believes, that the United States were permanently divided, and that circumstances might take such a shape as to afford him the opportunity of acquiring Texas, of recovering Louisiana, and of possessing the mouth of the Mississippi.

To accomplish this end, it was necessary to obtain a foothold on this continent, at a point as near the United States as possible, and particularly to Louisiana and Texas—a point of departure where he could collect securely and conveniently a large army and a large naval force, and form a base of supplies.

The Emperor of the French, therefore, directed himself, not so much against Mexico as against the United States. How far he has succeeded in his plans is now a matter which belongs to history. It is sufficient to say, that by means of his Mexican expedition he has been able to collect, on the American continent, almost on the Southern frontier of the United States, a large French army, and has sent to the Gulf of Mexico a very considerable French squadron, much larger than could have been necessary for any purpose connected with Mexico—a country that has no navy; and all this has been accomplished—strange to say—without any remonstrance, without any protest, and even without any demonstration of interest or concern, on the part of the United States.⁵⁴

⁵³ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 105.

⁵⁴ Matías Romero, *The Situation of Mexico: Speech, Delivered by Señor Romero, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Mexico to the United States*,



Romero's strategy did not consist of asking for help as a representative of a republic with a similar ideology to that of the United States; instead, he tried to convince the influential New York elite that there were practical reasons for cooperating with Mexico, and that supporting its cause was an act of pure and unadulterated self-interest.

By 1864, the situation of the Juárez government had become critical. Maximilian of Habsburg arrived in Mexico with the recognition of every European power, while the United States did not have an official representative to the Juárez administration, which could be interpreted as tacit recognition of Maximilian's government. Yet, as Hamnett argues, this was probably due to the itinerant nature of the Juárez government during the Second Empire.⁵⁵ And although Romero was still acknowledged as a representative of Mexico in Washington, he had to compete with French diplomats and Maximilian's representative in Washington and New York.

Finally, in 1865 the American Civil War ended and the situation of both Mexico and Matías Romero changed. In the summer of that same year, he was invited to travel to the United States with President Andrew Johnson and Seward. According to Bernstein, Romero's relationship with Seward improved considerably during the trip, to the extent that Seward announced

at one of the political events on their tour that foreign intervention in Mexico had to end before November of that year.⁵⁶ After four years of failed attempts, it is only reasonable, as Bernstein says, to assume Romero took this statement with a pinch of salt, but in October 1865, Seward put his words into action, appointing a new minister for Mexico and publicly rejecting France's proposition to withdraw its troops in exchange for recognition of Maximilian. Three months later, in January 1866, Napoleon III began withdrawing his troops from Mexico. Only after the French army had left did Seward lift the ban that had been placed on the purchase of weapons by Mexico in the United States during the French Intervention.⁵⁷

The French Intervention over and the monarchists defeated, Romero returned to Mexico in November 1867 to join Juárez's cabinet. The diplomatic prowess he had exhibited in the United States had earned him public recognition and he was welcomed home with 11 canon salutes on his arrival at the port of Veracruz in late 1867.⁵⁸ In January of the following year, he was appointed secretary for Finance. Just ten years had passed since he had joined the SRE as an unpaid intern and he was only 30.

at a Dinner in the City of New York, on the 16th of December, 1863 (New York, Wm. C. Bryant & Co. Printers, 1864): 9-10.

⁵⁵ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 156-157.

⁵⁶ H. Bernstein, *Matías Romero*: 141.

⁵⁷ B. Hamnett, *Juárez*: 159-160.

⁵⁸ "Noticias nacionales", *El Siglo XIX* (November 16, 1867): 3.



“The Hardest Position”: The Secretariat for Finance and Public Credit

Matías Romero served as finance minister on three occasions: from January 1868 to June 1872, under the Juárez government; from May 1877 to April 1879, during the first administration of Porfirio Díaz; and from March to December of 1892, once again under Díaz. During the interim periods, he tended his own businesses, worked as a representative of the people or practiced diplomacy again. Over and beyond his successes and failures in these years, his work as a businessman and government minister was indubitably influenced by his experiences abroad, which, in turn, influenced his later work as a diplomat. This chapter explores Matías Romero's time at the Secretariat for Finance and Public Credit (SHCP, by its acronym in Spanish) and his flirtation with coffee farming in Chiapas in an attempt to better understand his diplomatic achievements of the 1880s and 1890s.

The battle against the Maximilian regime had left the coffers bare and the federal government was frequently hard pushed to pay its employees' salaries, much less meet domestic and foreign debt obligations. Although the victory over the conservatives had given the Juárez government substantial political clout, it needed to handle its finances with care to ensure these did not become its downfall. The president appointed Romero for this delicate task on January 15, 1868. At just 30, the new finance minister was already an experienced diplomat and quite probably unrivaled in his knowledge of U.S. politics.

As soon as his appointment was publicly announced, it was widely applauded. One of the first to congratulate him was William Seward, who sent him a letter in February expressing his high expectations:

I congratulate you and I trust may equally congratulate Mexico upon your advancement to the office of Secretary of State for finance. You are well that your acceptance of a ministerial trust at home is in

my judgement wiser for yourself that even the most succesful and pleasing mission abroad. The Minister who can extract the finances of Mexico from the embarrassment produced by forty years of civil war and place them upon a safe and permanent foundation, will lay a large claim upon the gratitude of his country and the admiration of mankind. If it be possible for any statesman I feel sure that you can achieve it this.⁵⁹

Romero publicly announced he would do everything in his power to ensure the SHCP was a shoulder the Juárez government could lean on. This, however, required juggling daily obligations and oftentimes waiting anxiously for cash transfers from the port of Veracruz, as a letter to its customs administrator, José Antonio Gamboa, reveals: “Yesterday I received your letter dated the 19th of this month [October 1868] in which you offer me little hope of funds. Fortunately, last night I received your telegraph of the same date offering me funds that will be available before the month is out.”⁶⁰

The trials and tribulations of the position aside, Romero undertook initiatives for the wide-sweeping reform of the ministry, the most ambitious of which were the nine

proposals submitted to Congress on April 1, 1869. It was a reform plan with multiple objectives: reduce dependence on tax revenues from foreign trade by strengthening domestic sources of income, eliminate taxes detrimental to the economy and taxes on mining as a key sector of the economy, set up savings funds and issue treasury notes. Romero’s goal was to completely change the physiognomy of the Finance Ministry to make way for a fiscal policy that would not hinder economic development. In his 1869 report, he outlines his plan:

The Executive believes [...] that the product of national revenue, formed by existing taxes, is insufficient to cover the administration’s expenses, even if these were collected efficiently. It also believes some of them should be reformed due to their anti-economic nature and substituted for others that will bear more fruitful results without affecting production.⁶¹

These initiatives were not even discussed by Congress, but this did not prevent the new finance minister from finding other ways of modernizing federal finances. In 1872, he invoked the extraordinary powers conferred upon the Executive fol-

⁵⁹ William H. Seward to Matías Romero, Washington D.C., February 20, 1868, Bank of Mexico Historical Archive (BANXICOHA), Matías Romero Collection, book 113, f. 1.

⁶⁰ Matías Romero to José Antonio Gamboa, Mexico City, October 25, 1868, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 5, f. 113.

⁶¹ *Memoria que el secretario de Hacienda y Crédito Público presenta al Congreso de la Unión de 16 de septiembre de 1869, y que comprende el año fiscal de 1° de julio de 1868 al 30 de junio de 1869* (Mexico, Imprenta del Gobierno en Palacio, 1869): 14.

lowing the Revolt of La Noria to decree a new customs tariff and a Stamp Act. These two amendments corrected deficiencies in taxes on foreign trade and established a new tax that was to become a pillar of the country's fiscal policy for decades to come.⁶²

The job of the SHCP required keeping constant tabs on revenues and the budget, while meeting countless demands by traders, farmers, industrialists and miners. Add to this constant tension between lawmakers and the Executive, compounded by pressure from groups whose interests had been affected by Romero's reforms, and the result was an exhausting task, so arduous that in early 1870, Romero admitted he was ready to step down:

In Mexico, when one doesn't lend oneself to loan sharking, the Finance Ministry is the most torturous of places conceivable. One has to be inside or very close to it to appreciate all the headaches it causes. The day I can leave with my head held high will be a happy day for me. At the moment it is not possible because certain people who view me as an obstacle have plotted against me in the most heinous of ways to force my departure. There are two

serious accusations against me that are to be submitted at the next session of Congress and that are truly ridiculous. Only a sense of honor and knowing I am doing my duty will give me the strength to hold out a while longer.⁶³

Headaches aside, Romero held the deep-seated liberal conviction that Mexico's economic development depended primarily on exploiting its natural resources for export purposes. Trade in commodities and agricultural products, he believed, would bring Mexico the prosperity it had been chasing for so long. This conviction that the international system, with all its inherent opportunities and limitations, was vital to the economic development of Mexico reflected the clarity with which Romero had come to think of Mexico. So convinced was he that, almost as soon as he took office as finance minister, he decided to try his hand at farming and requested reports on commercial crops, specifically tropical fruit, in different parts of the country, like Baja California, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Chiapas. In the case of Chiapas, he even drew up a comprehensive regional development program that, among other measures, included the transformation of the port of San Benito into a deep-sea port, subsidies for a steamboat company so it could establish a permanent route that took in this same

⁶² For an analysis of the proposed tax reform in 1869 and its scope, see Graciela Márquez, "Matías Romero y la práctica de las ideas económicas liberales: la reforma hacendaria de 1869", en Ernest Sánchez Santiró (coord.), *Pensar la hacienda pública. Personajes, proyectos y contextos en torno al pensamiento fiscal en Nueva España y México (siglos XVIII-XX)* (Mexico, Instituto Mora, 2014).

⁶³ Matías Romero to Luis Maneyro (Paris, France), Mexico City, March 8, 1870, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 10, ff. 462-463.

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Atendiendo al muy acreditado patriotismo, aptitud, ilustración y demás cualidades de V., el C. Presidente de la República ha tenido á bien nombrar á V. Sr. de Estado y del despacho de Hacienda y Crédito público, esperando que aceptará V. este encargo para prestar en él sus ~~muy~~ importantes servicios.

Tengo la honra de comunicarlo á V. protestándole mis muy atenta consideraciones.

Indep^a y Libertad. Méjico
Enero 15 de 1868.

L. de F.

Don. Matías Romero.

Presente.

port, the installation of telegraphic lines and the settling of the border dispute with Guatemala.⁶⁴

In 1871, Romero invested in a coffee crop on El Cedro in El Triunfo, Chiapas, but a fire and problems purchasing the land forced him to give up on the venture. Instead, he turned to his contacts with the idea of purchasing a plantation in the Soconusco region, having heard stories of how fertile the soil was and how perfect the weather was for producing coffee, sugar, cocoa, cotton and rubber. So over-zealous were the reports that one man even went as far as to describe the Soconusco as "the Eden and gemstone of the great Mexican nation."⁶⁵

Excited at the idea of becoming a coffee farmer in the Soconusco and in sore need of a break due to his diminished health, Romero resigned as finance minister on May 31, 1872 to embark on what the historian Daniel Cosío Villegas calls "Matías's adventure."⁶⁶ Toward late 1872, he was seeking a place to regain his health and set up a farming business and he believed the Soconusco region met both cri-

teria. But his plans were to be thwarted by conflicts with the local cacique, Sebastián Escobar, and the president of Guatemala, Justo Rufino Barrios. In 1875, Romero was forced to leave his properties and his businesses behind out of fear for his life, a fear that, judging from what his wife Lucrecia Allen told Matías's brother, was justified: "He has a lot of enemies there [in the Soconusco], especially among the Guatemalans. Sebastián Escobar is Matías's mortal enemy and now he is in the Soconusco".⁶⁷

Romero managed to survive the scheming down south and after a brief stint as a congressman, accepted Porfirio Díaz's offer to take over as finance minister again. This time, he seemed to have a better understanding of the political nature of his appointment and how sensitive a time in history Díaz had been elected president of Mexico. With regards to his appointment, Romero wrote this reply to Ignacio L. Vallarta:

I am deeply honored at the vote of confidence the President has given me and make it known to you that, without being unaware of the gravity of the present situation, I accept the position offered me. It has demanded great effort on my part because I was not desirous of actively participating in the country's politics again, but I believe that, given

⁶⁴ *Memoria de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al cuadragésimo sexto año económico, transcurrido de 1 de julio de 1870 a 30 de junio de 1871. Presentada por el secretario de Hacienda al sexto Congreso de la Unión el 16 de septiembre de 1871* (Mexico, Imprenta del Gobierno en Palacio, 1871): 73-74.

⁶⁵ José E. Ibarra to Matías Romero, Tapachula, Chiapas, January 21, 1871, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 12990.

⁶⁶ Daniel Cosío Villegas, "La aventura de Matías," *Historia Mexicana*, No. 29 (July-September, 1958): 35-59.

⁶⁷ Lula B. Allen Romero to José Romero, Mexico City, January 5, 1876, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 19059.



Coffe plant. Print published in an article by Matías Romero titled "The Cultivation of Coffe in Uruapan", 1877.

the difficult circumstances the Republic is facing, it is the duty of all citizens to cooperate in the consolidation of peace, and that another conflict would bring the nation to its knees.⁶⁸

In May 1877, he kept his promise to Díaz and joined his cabinet once he was elected. The new finance minister wasted no time and immediately tackled the task of balancing the books, which was an extremely complicated undertaking because resources were scarce and military expenses were eating up most of the budget. Despite the difficult circumstances of the second half of the 1870s, Romero envisaged an improvement in the federal government's performance and believed it had a role to play promoting the growth of exports, which, in turn, would drive the country's development. This was the vision he set forth in the conclusion of *Memoria de Hacienda*, his 1877-1878 report:

Rest assured no branch of the public administration requires, among us, so much attention, so much study and so many reforms as the Finance Ministry. Unfortunately, almost everything remains to be done, although the consolidation of peace and the progress of the Republic largely depend on it. With wise and fair laws we would have sufficient resources for a suitable economic budget, without neglect-

ing, as is proper, the material improvements the nation is so badly in need of, for it is almost certain that covering public expenditures opportunely would preserve peace. With wise and fair laws Mexico's foreign and domestic trade would increase considerably, as would production of exportable goods and the manufacture of national goods, for which the country is in an advantageous position. Consolidating public debt and paying the interest assigned it on a timely basis would not only give value to a great wealth that now lies almost lifeless, but would give Mexico access to the immense resources of credit it has been deprived of for so many years.⁶⁹

Romero was right to point to the regularization of debt repayments as a key component of the federal government's long-term public finance strategy, but he would only remain finance minister until April 1879. His very accurate diagnosis was revisited the following decade by Manuel Dublán, who was credited with renegotiating the government's debt.

In the early 1890s, a sharp dip in silver prices and the loss of crops triggered a severe economic and financial crisis that was exacerbated by the death of Dublán. Faced with such a bleak outlook, Díaz did

⁶⁸ Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Relations, May 24, 1877, GEADH, LE-1037, f. 80.

⁶⁹ *Memoria de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al quincuagésimo tercer año económico transcurrido del 1 de julio de 1877 a 30 de junio de 1878 presentada por el secretario del estado y el despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público al Congreso de la Unión el 16 de septiembre de 1878* (Mexico, Imprenta de Francisco Díaz de León, 1879): 119.

not hesitate to knock on the door of an experienced civil servant to manage his government's finances. In April 1892, he offered the job to Matías Romero, who had been heading the Mexican legation in Washington for almost a decade. Romero gave a cautious reply. He warned the president that his poor health meant he could not live for long periods in a place as high above sea level as Mexico City and that, while he appreciated the appointment, he felt his performance as finance minister between 1877 and 1879 had not lived up to expectations and was afraid history might repeat itself. Perhaps even more importantly, he warned Díaz that foreign traders, the country's industrialists and the SHCP employees, among others, might oppose his appointment and prevent him from carrying out his duties. Nonetheless, as his reply indicates, he agreed to serve as finance minister for the third time, but not without establishing his terms and conditions:

Since you appeal to my patriotism by asking this service of me and since I have never put my personal convenience above service to my country, no matter what the sacrifices this entails, I must say that if, despite the inconveniences I have pointed out and the many others that are obvious to you, you still believe it best I serve in this position, I will accept, but on the condition I only remain in it until the first of December of this year, which is when your new constitutional period will

most likely begin. That way I will accompany you during the election, which is always the hardest, and will remain in office as long as my health permits, although I do not believe I will be able to hold out more than six months at the Secretariat for Finance.⁷⁰

Romero's experience was essential to combatting the crisis. Díaz was aware of this and accepted his terms. He served as finance minister from May 27, 1893, until May 12 of the following year, although it should be noted that, in February, the chief clerk José Y. Limantour took over as *chargé d'affaires*, when Romero traveled to Washington to attend the taking of office of President Grover Cleveland.

To sum up, in the entire history of the Secretariat for Finance, from when it was founded at the dawn of the Republic right up to our present day, no one except Matías Romero has held the office on three separate occasions.⁷¹ Yet the best description of his time at the ministry is perhaps found in the advice he gave Jesús Fuentes y Muñiz, who was finance minister from 1882 to 1884, as to the essence of the job:

⁷⁰ Matías Romero to Porfirio Díaz, Washington D.C., April 14, 1892, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 47, ff. 696-697.

⁷¹ Graciela Márquez, "El hombre del no. El perfil de los secretarios de Hacienda del siglo XX," Mónica Blanco and Paul Garner (coords.), *Biografía del personaje público, siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico, UNAM, 2012).

I sincerely hope that for your sake and that of the country that your time at the Secretariat for Finance as a cabinet member is not fruitless and that you do not limit yourself to being a passive minister who tries only to get through the day, but that you have sufficient

energy to undertake and carry out the reforms our revenue and economic system needs for the country to progress.⁷²

⁷² Matías Romero to Jesús Fuentes y Muñiz, Washington D.C., October 3, 1882, *BANXICOHA*, Matías Romero Collection, book 41, f. 253.

About Partners and Business Ventures

Matías Romero conceived of economic development in terms of comparative advantages and believed Mexico should exploit its agricultural and mining resources for export purposes, using capital put up by both foreign and Mexican investors. Like many others in the nineteenth century, his country's natural wealth prompted him to take an interest in business. It was an interest he shared with his fellow politicians. In February 1869, Romero invited Porfirio Díaz to partner up with him to purchase two sugar plantations owned by Pío Bermejillo in the state of Morelos. Initially, Díaz promised to study the proposal and mortgage his properties in Oaxaca to raise the necessary capital,¹ but a few months later he declined the offer:

Aside from the financial reasons I have already mentioned, there are others I fear I cannot trust the mail with [...] As soon as I have the opportunity, I will explain in more detail in person, but until then, suffice to say I am sure that when I tell you, you will say I am right and agree that I have made the proper decision.²

We will never know what was said during that conversation—if indeed it ever took place—, but what we do know is that Romero was unable to talk Díaz into this or any other farming venture, whereas Díaz managed to persuade Romero to serve as his finance minister on two *separate* occasions. Between 1872 and 1875, Romero settled in the Soconusco region, where he invested in coffee and other tropical products, but political conflicts forced him to abandon his businesses and return to public life as a legislator before accepting another term as finance minister.

¹ Porfirio Díaz's answers to Romero's proposal are found in five letters written from Oaxaca: Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, April 10, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 04864; Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, April 24, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 05089; P. Díaz a M. Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, May 31, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 05661; P. Díaz a M. Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, June 22, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 06083, y P. Díaz a M. Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, July 28, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 06685.

² P. Díaz to M. Romero, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, August 14, 1869, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 06072.

In 1880, Romero once again tried his hand at business—this time at railroad building. The state government of Oaxaca granted him a concession and he set out to look for partners. He managed to get Ulysses Grant interested in the project, as well as the railroad pundits William Dodge and Jay Gould. It was along with these men and some Mexican partners that he founded the Mexican Southern Railroad in 1881. Grant was appointed director and Romero manager, but his days as an entrepreneur were cut short in March 1882 when he returned to public service as an envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in the United States. Meanwhile, ground had not yet been broken on the works stipulated in the federal government contract. The company filed for an extension and was granted one, but speculation on the U.S. stock market hit the Mexican Southern Railroad hard and a bank in which Grant was a majority stockholder went bankrupt, adding to the company's problems. Given the severity of the crisis, it was likely the Mexican Southern Railroad would continue to default on its obligations and end up losing the concession.

The prediction came true and in 1885 the Mexican government cancelled the Mexican Southern Railroad's concession.³ To avoid a conflict of interests, Romero withdrew from the company, whose failure could be attributed more to unfavorable external circumstances and poor internal decisions than a flaw in Romero's conviction that the railroads were vital to bolstering exports and, with them, the Mexican economy. It was this conviction that fueled his interest in investing in the sector and it was with this same conviction that he sought out partners and infected them with his enthusiasm for Mexico's potential. But like the savvy businessman he was, he offered no guarantees. This was the real challenge of transitioning to the business world.

³ Alfredo Ávila, "Diplomacia e interés privado: Matías Romero, el Soconusco y el Southern Mexican Railroad, 1881-1883," *Secuencia*, No. 38 (May-August, 1997): 72.



From North to South: Diplomacy Again, 1882-1898

In March 1882, President Manuel González (1880-1884) appointed Matías Romero envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of Mexico to the United States. His return to diplomacy in Washington posed some very different challenges to those he had faced in the 1860s. Despite persisting mistrust of the expansionist policy of the United States in the late 1870s and early 1880s, growing investment in the construction of railroads and the mining industry had changed the face of trade relations between the two nations. During the reconstruction period that followed the American Civil War, Mexican-U.S. relations began taking the course Matías Romero had envisaged two decades earlier. His new task would basically consist of aligning diplomatic efforts with these integrating economic forces. One such effort was the negotiation of the Reciprocity Treaty of 1883, but while Mexico's relationship with the United States was of prime importance, Romero's diplomatic mission in Washington required he involve himself in other matters, like negotiating boundaries between Mexico and Guatemala and the First International Conference of American States. As Frederick R. Guernsey says, Romero was privy to inside knowledge about the political scene in Washington, D.C. and was prepared to use it to further Mexico's interests:

Don Matías Romero is deemed an eminence of U.S. diplomacy. He is one of the few Mexican civil servants whose name we are familiar with [...]. He proudly declares to be a native of Oaxaca, one of the tropical states on Mexico's Pacific coast, from whence three other famous Mexicans hail: Benito Juárez, an indomitable, patriotic president, former president Díaz and Ignacio Mariscal, foreign minister of the González government [...]. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Mr. Romero is, in all likelihood, more familiar with the United States than a large portion of the civil population and even journalists. He knows all the weakness of our political system, is up to date with trade statistics, keeps close tabs on the

expansion of our extensive rail system and has all relevant news and information on our public life at his fingertips. He has stayed among our people many times and during his lengthy sojourns in Washington before and after the Civil War has become acquainted with government officials and, subsequently, has great knowledge of us. Plus he has the advantage of being the husband of a charming American lady.⁷³

In the following paragraphs we will take a closer look at Matías Romero's diplomatic career, from his appointment as special envoy and minister plenipotentiary in 1882 until his death in 1898. During this time, he tirelessly undertook countless tasks, projects and commissions, all with unwavering dedication and a global perspective of the challenges of his diplomatic representation. It would be impossible to discuss each and every one of his endeavors, so we have chosen to focus on two bilateral negotiations: the 1883 Reciprocity Treaty with the United States and the 1882 Boundaries Treaty with Guatemala, an analysis of which will shed light on his views vis-à-vis economic development and how skilled he was at protecting Mexico's interests. To round out this analysis, we go into detail on his role as a representative of Mexico at the First Conference of American States, where he showcased his skills as a diplomat and negotiator, very adroitly drawing on his already in-

depth knowledge of the United States in a debate on affairs that far exceeded the scope of the bilateral relationship.

THE RECIPROCITY TREATY OF 1883

As we have already mentioned, Matías Romero viewed international trade as the main potential driver of Mexico's economic growth and, subsequently, had promoted projects to improve infrastructure connecting production centers with ports and borders. Others provided for the expansion of domestic and international communications, the elimination of customs prohibitions, tax exemptions for exports and the simplification of customs procedures. As finance minister, he promoted reforms in these areas to foster domestic and foreign investment. In the mid-1870s, when John Foster, minister plenipotentiary of the United States in Mexico, gave a very negative prognosis of trade between the two countries, Romero, who was finance minister at the time, replied with a lengthy, well-documented exposé complete with statistics. He was much more optimistic than Foster about the country's potential and proposed ways of attaining the prosperity the country had long yearned for via international trade. One of these was the negotiation of a reciprocal trade agreement, as he clearly stated in the "Finance Ministry's Statement of January 15, 1879, regarding Mexico's situation and to rectify the errors in the Honorable John W. Foster's report":

⁷³ R. Guernsey, "An American Diplomat. The Brilliant Career of a Mexican Statesman," *The Boston Herald*, January 2, 1883.

DEPARTAMENTO POLITICO
SECCION DE AMERICA

Nº 69.

México, 29 de Enero de 1885

El Presidente de la República ha tenido a bien nombrar, con fecha 22 del actual, Enviado extraordinario y Ministro plenipotenciario de México en los Estados Unidos de América al Señor Don Matias Romero, cuyo nombramiento ha sido ya aprobado por la Comisión permanente del Congreso de la Unión.

Lo comunico a Usted para su conocimiento y le ruego mi consideración

Mariscal

Señor Encargado de Negocios
ad interim de México en los
Estados Unidos de América.

Washington.

69971
393-1
Secretaría
de
Relaciones Exteriores.

México, noviembre 29 de 1898.

ESTADO DE AMÉRICA,
ASIA Y OCEANÍA.

274.

El Señor Presidente
atendiendo a los muy distin-
guidos servicios que ha pres-
tado Usted a la República,
así como a su aptitud y de-
más cualidades que lo reco-
miendan, ha tenido a bien nom-
brarlo Embajador de México
en los Estados Unidos de Amé-
rica.

Confirmado este nombra-
miento por la Cámara de Se-
nadores en su sesión de ayer,
me es grato comunicarle a
Usted para su conocimiento
y satisfacción y reiterarle a
la vez las protestas de mi
distinguido aprecio.

Mariscal

Señor

Don Mateo Romero,

7.

7.

7.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, one of the most effective ways of promoting trade between Mexico and the United States would be to enter into a *reciprocity agreement*, based on equitable terms that suit the interests of both Republics in equal proportion.⁷⁴

Although he was convinced of the positive outcome of such an agreement, Romero acknowledged that the bill for the McLane-Ocampo Treaty of 1859, whose terms were disadvantageous to Mexico, had made the country wary of new trade negotiations with the United States. Likewise, the conclusions of the commission set up to assess the Reciprocity Treaty between the United States and the Islands of Hawaii, signed in 1875, underscored its unequitable terms. Yet Romero knew that his opinion such an agreement was the best way of promoting trade between the two nations was shared in official circles in the United States. To this end, he cited the 1872 proposal of envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary Thomas H. Nelson, who stated that the two economies were complementary, which created a framework conducive to reciprocal trade, and that Mexico should receive

the same privileges the United States had granted Cuba, Brazil and Puerto Rico.

But paving the way for a reciprocity agreement would require overcoming Mexico's reticence and exploiting the willingness of the United States to strengthen trade ties with its southern neighbor. The former involved persuading the authorities such an agreement would benefit not just the United States, but Mexico too, while the latter implied securing a current of opinion sufficiently influential to get it approved. These conditions did not exist in the late 1870s. Romero outlined his ideas in his reply to Foster, but these would not be implemented until later.

In early 1882, at the initiative of President Chester C. Arthur (1881-1885), the U.S. House of Representatives agreed to begin negotiating a reciprocity agreement with Mexico. There were sufficient arguments to justify such a decision. The previous year, the 1831 Treaty of Friendship and Trade had expired and was not renewed, and even though trade and U.S. investment in Mexico were on the rise, Manuel González's administration was wary and its initial stance was to reject a reciprocity agreement with the United States. Romero's first task, then, was to convince the Mexican authorities to sit down at the negotiating table by assuring them Mexico's interests would be duly protected. But overcoming skepticism turned out to be a more arduous task than Romero had foreseen, due a combination of factors that ranged from a clear preference for

⁷⁴ M. Romero, "Exposición de la Secretaría de Hacienda de 15 de enero de 1879 respecto de la situación de México y con objeto de rectificar los errores contenidos en el informe del honorable John W. Foster," *Memoria de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al quincuagésimo cuarto año económico transcurrido del 1 de julio de 1878 a 30 de junio de 1879. Presentada por el secretario de Estado y Despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público, Trinidad García, al Congreso de la Unión el 16 de septiembre de 1879* (Mexico, Imprenta del Comercio, de Dublán y Comp., 1880): 560.

European capital to dissatisfaction with the results of U.S.-owned rail companies and dubiousness as to the benefits of reciprocal trade. On April 1882, Pedro Santacilia wrote to Romero expressing such an opinion:

In all the banks and all the steamboat and rail companies, etc., Europeans are unfortunately gaining ground.

Worst of all, many of our politicians are party to these ideas, without even stopping to consider the country's historic traditions.

Truth be told, the Yankees are barbarians because they are unfamiliar with and have never studied the country's conditions, and are therefore deserving of the hatred Mexicans have for them.

They have not had the foresight to exploit the favorable circumstances they have managed to create with railway projects etc. and today it is only natural no one has faith in them.

[...] the idea of a reciprocal trade agreement with this country [the United States] is not at all well received here and, as I understand, neither does it have support in the United States. The best solution is what someone in Washington has already proposed: that each country, each nation modify its customs tariffs and regulations as best suits its interests.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, Romero was determined to persuade the Mexican authorities to make the most of President Arthur's initiative.

⁷⁵ Pedro Santacilia to Matías Romero, Mexico City, Mexico, April 16, 1882, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 30413.

Paradoxically, he had to prevent the United States approaching the Mexican government before he could do so, because otherwise there was the risk an agreement would be rejected off the bat and that the tide of what appeared to be favorable opinion in the United States would turn. When Ulysses Grant and Henry Trescot were appointed commissioners to strike up negotiations with Mexico, in his letter of August 6, 1882, Romero did not hesitate to ask the former U.S. president to hold back on accepting: "I hear the President has named you commissioner in Mexico to negotiate a trade agreement. I would appreciate it if you could put off accepting until the next time I see you, which I assume will be next Thursday or Friday".⁷⁶

In September, Romero wrote to President González recommending he begin negotiations and reiterate his support of reciprocal trade. He also underlined the importance of striking while the iron was hot: "I believe that, sooner or later, we will have to sign it and that the present circumstances are the most favorable under which to do so."⁷⁷ When González and his foreign minister, Ignacio Mariscal, failed to come to a decision, Romero requested a leave of absence from his post with the Mexican legation in Washington in mid-September and

⁷⁶ Matías Romero to Ulysses Grant, Washington, D.C., August 6, 1882.

⁷⁷ Matías Romero to Manuel González, Washington, D.C., September 6, 1882, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 41, ff. 55-56.

traveled to Mexico City to obtain the government's approval to begin negotiations. The strategy worked and he was instructed to begin drawing up a draft agreement.

In early October 1882, back in the United States, Romero began drawing up a draft and sent a copy to Grant, who openly advocated reciprocal trade. In November of that same year, he completed the bill and conveyed his impressions to Mariscal:

Based on my recent stay in Washington and my examination of this matter, I believe the present circumstances are the best under which to try and resolve this grave issue with the greatest probability of obtaining advantages for our country, and that its postponement could be damaging to us.

The administration that currently determines the destination of the United States is a sincere friend of Mexico, as it has demonstrated with several matters you yourself have knowledge of and, far from intending to harm us, it sincerely desires to help us in all that it can to secure the progress and wellbeing of our homeland. It is not, I repeat, out to take undue advantage of us.

Furthermore, as regards U.S. policy toward Mexico, this administration is guided by the opinion of General Grant, who, as you know, leads the Republican Party faction that is currently in power.

[...]

Finally, there is another argument in favor of exploiting this opportunity to enter into a trade agreement with the United States: divisions within the Republican Party currently in

power and attempts by the Democratic Party to use these schisms to regain power.

[...]

The text of the bill is so favorable to Mexico there is the possibility objections will be raised and that it may not be approved by the U.S. Senate after it is signed. It should be pointed out that such objections would be raised by the American plenipotentiaries signing the agreement and not Mexico. Of course, if they thought the treaty would not pass the U.S. Senate, they would not sign it and, by the same token, if they do, it is because they are convinced it will be ratified. But even supposing it were not, Mexico would be in an enviable position to turn down all future requests for customs exemptions by the U.S. government, given that, far from refusing to grant exemptions with a view to promoting trade with the United States, we would have agreed to grant all those deemed prudent and that, in the view of the North American plenipotentiaries, were sufficient to achieve the desired purpose. After this, there would be no grounds on which to make more demands and we would be perfectly entitled to refuse them.

Perhaps I am overly concerned, but I place so much importance on the exemption from duties on our sugar on the U.S. market because I feel this would give Mexico an enormous advantage [...]. I believe our country can produce all or most of the sugar consumed in the United States, even though we would need some time and capital to achieve these production levels.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Washington, D.C., s/f [November 15, 1882?], BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 41, ff. 351-357.

This is an example of how seasoned a diplomat Matías Romero was: instead of trying to convince the Mexican authorities by focusing exclusively on economic variables, his argument was based on an analysis of the importance of capitalizing on the political situation in the United States to maximize the benefits of the proposed agreement. In late December 1882, the bill was finally approved by the SRE and Romero and Estanislao Cañedo were appointed to represent Mexico at the negotiating table. At the petition of the U.S. government, the negotiations were to be held in Washington, D.C., with Ulysses Grant and Henry Trescot representing the United States.

The text the representatives were to discuss was the one approved by the SRE. The lifting of customs duties was at the core of the agreement and the proposition was that the United States agree to exempt 29 Mexican products, mainly commodities and semi-processed agricultural and mining products, and in return, 73 U.S. products, mainly processed inputs and industrial goods, would be able to enter Mexico duty free.⁷⁹ Yet mistrust continued to shroud the trade agreement, as evidenced by the Mexican SRE's instructions that its representatives reject any changes to the approved text, no matter what their nature. Romero could not

conceal his irritation at the rigidity of these orders when Cañedo invoked them to reject changes to the list of Mexican products for which Romero had negotiated exemptions. Nonetheless, he followed the guidelines he had received and in a letter to Mariscal dated January 16, 1883, expressed his frustration:

At yesterday and today's sessions of the commission, your bill was approved and we are now awaiting your response to the consultation we telegraphed you today regarding the word *steel*, which has been eliminated in the section referring to instruments and tools for craftsmen in article II of the bill.

Cañedo did not want the eight Mexican products I had managed to get accepted by the American commissioners to appear in the text of article I of the bill and I have had to make the sacrifice of removing them. I am officially reporting this to you so you can see the results of such categorical orders.

Tomorrow or the day after we will sign the treaty and you will see it was no pipedream of mine when I assured you the American commissioners would sign it. Unfortunately, I am not so certain it will be approved by the Senate. In fact, I doubt it will, despite General Grant's influence. I will notify you by wire as soon as we sign the treaty.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ See the full list of products and the implications of the treaty in the sugar sector in Graciela Márquez Colín, "El Tratado de Reciprocidad de 1883: ¿una oportunidad perdida?", *Historia Mexicana*, No. 244, (April-June, 2012): 1413-1459.

⁸⁰ Matías Romero to Ignacio Mariscal, Washington, D.C., January 16, 1883, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 41, f. 596.

Despite the inflexibility of the Mexican government, the U.S. representatives accepted the text of the agreement without objection. The protocol of the Reciprocity Treaty between Mexico and the United States was signed on January 20, 1883, and it was agreed that it would be ratified one year after that, first by the U.S. Senate and then by the Mexican one. Romero and other reciprocal trade advocates had won this first round, as William J. Palmer, president of the Mexican National Railway Company, acknowledged:

I am glad to see the prospects look better for your success in respect of reciprocity treaty between the United States and Mexico. Should your succeed in carrying out the measures announced by the newspapers, you will certainly have reason to congratulate yourself upon having secured a great boom for your country, and the citizens of the United States will thank you for your efforts.

The introduction of the sugar, tobacco, and hemp without duty into the United States, and the introduction into Mexico upon the same basis, iron, cotton, and their American products cannot fail to be of great advantage to both countries. Specially is this the case with free sugar, which will lead to the rapid offering and enrichment of Tierra Caliente lands, throughout all Mexico.

If we can be of any service in helping to bring about the ratification of the proposed terms, I shall be glad to use any influence we may have.⁸¹

⁸¹ William J. Palmer to Matías Romero, New York, January 23, 1883, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 30758.

A great deal had been achieved, but ratification by the U.S. Senate would be a tough sell, as anticipated by Romero himself even before the signing of the protocol. Convinced of how gainful the agreement would be to Mexico, he revealed to Mauricio Wollheim, an official at the SHCP, his fears of it hitting a brick wall further down the line: "Its provisions are so advantageous to Mexico that there is the danger it will not be approved by the U.S. Senate. Nonetheless, I believe we have obtained a victory with the signing of this treaty."⁸²

The extraordinary period of sessions of the U.S. Senate ended in February 1883, but the agreement had not even been submitted for approval: its ratification would be shelved until sessions recommenced in early December. Meanwhile, there had been reshufflings at the SRE following Mariscal's appointment to the Mexican legation in London. José Fernández was appointed as chargé d'affaires of this legation in September 1883, and toward year end, it was announced that Mexico would be extending Germany the same privileges granted the United States once the Reciprocity Treaty was ratified. This concession stemmed from the most-favored-nation clause in the Treaty of Friendship and Trade signed by Mexico and Germany the previous year, but the news alarmed Romero because he felt it was contrary to

⁸² Matías Romero to Mauricio Wollheim, Washington, D.C., February 15, 1883, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 41, f. 738.

Cuba, Mexico and the Reciprocity Treaty

Throughout the entire nineteenth century, the Cuban issue was cause for concern for Mexico's governments. For decades, Cuba was seen primarily as a threat to Mexico's independence, for as long as it remained under Spanish control it was an obvious base from which to launch an expedition to reconquer Mexico. Later on, when the likelihood of a Spanish invasion seemed to dissipate, the greatest danger was that it would become yet another province of the United States. Just as Guadalupe Victoria's government had plotted to invade the island and instigate a slave rebellion that would terminate the control of the Spanish Crown, so the government of Porfirio Díaz deployed its diplomatic forces to mediate in the conflict between the Spanish Crown and the Cuban rebels. Its plans even included the creation of a Cuban-Mexican confederation of sorts as a way of ending the conflict on the island. By this time, however, it was not the Spanish Crown, but the United States that was the main obstacle to Mexico's plans for Cuba.¹

On August 5, 1884, Matías Romero wrote to the foreign minister informing him of his concerns:

The Republican Party, or at least its practical, thinking faction, would prefer to see Cuba a free, independent republic [...]. What it now mainly wants is to monopolize, so to speak, trade with Cuba.

The Democratic Party would prefer, in my view, to see Cuba annexed to the United States [...]. But I believe neither party would look kindly on the annexation of Cuba to Mexico, and in my view, neither would directly support this.

I am convinced that once trade between our two nations and the production of sugar in ours begin to expand as a result of the reciprocity treaty, Cuba's economic situation will worsen to the point where, unless the United States enters into an agreement with Spain that provides for the importation of Cuban sugar to the country free of duties, the Cubans will want to be annexed to Mexico, or at the very least, a great number will emigrate to our country in search of the exemptions granted our sugar and tobacco.²

¹ Rafael Rojas, *Cuba Mexicana. Historia de una anexión imposible* (Mexico, SRE), 2001.

² GEADH, Archive of the Embassy of Mexico in the United States (AEMUS), file 130, case file 17.

Matías Romero saw trade as much more than an economic force—the reciprocity treaty was of economic importance, but it also had geopolitical implications for Mexico. You might say Romero was too optimistic when it came to trade, but what is interesting is how his economic rationale informed his work as a diplomat.



Mexico's interests and viewed it as a serious threat to the ratification of the trade agreement with the United States. As the U.S. Senate was preparing to take a vote, Romero shared his concerns with Pedro Santacilia and confided in him that he suspected some factions were still opposed to the treaty:

This is a grave matter in my view, not because of the agreement pending with the United States, which contains no major concessions when all is said and done, but because of the precedent it sets and that will greatly affect the country's future. If by virtue of a general clause Mexico deems Germans to be natives of the most favored nation—a clause that appears in all friendship, trade and navigation treaties and that has never been extended to the provisions of reciprocity agreements—, we are going to grant them the advantages of the agreement pending with the United States without receiving anything in return, we are setting ourselves up to forego the advantages of any future reciprocity agreements. Since the United States could not grant any significant advantages, if they know that the ones we gave them in return we extend to every other nation we trade with, would they think the same of us as we would think of them if, once the pending treaty is approved they allowed the island of Cuba to import sugar free of duties based on the same argument we are using now?

If the government does not want to approve the reciprocity treaty, it would be more decorous and less troublesome to say so outright. From what you have told me in your letters, I infer that

public opinion remains opposed to it and that the government shares this opinion. This is because they have not taken the time to study the matter in depth. A careful analysis is enough to convince even the most passionate of opponents of the advantages of your treaty.⁸³

The term for the ratification of the Reciprocity Treaty was due to expire on January 20, 1884 and Romero stepped up his diplomatic efforts as the date approached. His strategy consisted of rallying all the support he humanly could. On January 6, he wrote to the son of General Grant, who was convalescing in New York, to ask him if his father would be well enough to attend the Senate vote in Washington, D.C.:

I would like very much to know how is the General getting along and what are the chances of his recovery and whether it is likely that he may be able to come to Washington during the present session of Congress.

This commercial reciprocity treaty signed by the General is now in great danger of not being modified or even rejected, and I think he could save it if he could come.⁸⁴

Four days later, Romero wrote to Coronel Grant once again to tell him partisans of the agreement were not expecting opposition

⁸³ Matías Romero to Pedro Santacilia, Washington, D.C., January 6, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, ff. 311-312.

⁸⁴ Matías Romero to Frederick Grant, Washington, D.C., January 6, 1883, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, f. 308.

and that he did not therefore think General Grant's presence in Washington, D.C. would be necessary. Instead, he recommended the general make a statement refuting insinuations by senators from the southern states that he had a vested interest in the treaty.⁸⁵

Romero continued lobbying for an extension of the ratification term and tried to convince its supporters not to make any changes to the text because, in his opinion, this could turn out to be counterproductive if its critics used this as an excuse to make their own modifications. He conveyed these ideas to the senator for Alabama, John J. Morgan, in a letter dated January 15, 1884:

I saw this morning Mr. Frelinghuysen in regard to the extension of the time to the exchange to the ratifications of the commercial reciprocity treaty, and his point has been agreed upon between us in such a very that the friends of the treaty do not need to be uneasy about it.

Mr. Frelinghuysen agreed with me that it would be very dangerous that the friends of the treaty should suggest additions or amendments because that would only open the way to its enemies to propose amendments to defeat the treaty.

Besides there is really no need of any amendment. The word *steel* is inserted in fraction 66 (35) article II of the treaty, page 4, and you will find it so in the printed copy of the same.

Coke is embraced in fraction 9 (19), article II, page 3, of the treaty which enumerates all

kinds of coal, and coke is only one kind of coal. Therefore it is unnecessary to add there coke.

It would not be advisable to modify article VIII of the treaty, as it is framed in accordance with previous treaties of the same character and with the provision of the Constitution of the United States. Besides, it seems to my that the objections that this treaty could originate in the House of Representatives has a very easy answer. It really originated in the House when the House passed a joint resolutions authorizing the president to appoint a communication to negotiate a commercial traty whith Mexico. This treaty is the result of the joint resolutions approved them by the House of Representatives.

Mr. Frelinghuysen desires that it will not be know that us have agreed upon an extension of time for the exchange of ratifications, and I think he is right in that.⁸⁶

The U.S. Senate voted on the ratification of the Reciprocity Treaty with Mexico on January 18, 1884. The outcome was 39 votes for and 20 against, in other words, not quite the two-thirds required for ratification. The defeat was not, however, definitive, and the slight margin by which the bill had failed to pass made it easy for its supporters to get a reconsideration approved and assurance that it would be put to the vote again during the same period of sessions. Since the original ratification deadline was about to expire, representatives of both governments agreed to a

⁸⁵ Matías Romero to Frederick Grant, Washington, D.C., January 10, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, f. 324.

⁸⁶ Matías Romero to John Morgan, Washington, D.C., January 15, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, ff. 411-413.



View of Washington looking down Pennsylvania Ave. Toward unfinished Capitol. National Hotel left, 1860.

six-month extension. Romero informed the SRE, Frelinghuysen and Trescot of the results of the vote that same day and told them a revote had been approved.⁸⁷ Three days later, he wrote to General Grant saying he regretted his absence, as he believed his support would have been decisive:

I suppose you know that the reciprocity treaty was lost in the Senate in Friday last, for one vote only. If you had been able to be here, its approval would have been certain. They are going to reconsider it, but I have little hope of a favourable vote.⁸⁸

A few days later, Romero outlined to Mauricio Wollheim the events that, in his mind,

⁸⁷ Matías Romero to Frelinghuysen; Matías Romero to Ignacio Mariscal; Matías Romero to Henry Trescot; January 18, 1884, Washington, D.C., BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, ff. 355-356.

⁸⁸ Matías Romero to Ulysses Grant, Washington, D.C., January 21, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, f. 361.

had contributed to the unfavorable outcome of the January 18 vote:

The affairs of the reciprocity treaty has been ill-fated. In that capital [Mexico City], at the instruction of Fuentes [finance minister], several changes were made to the bill I drew up and that I believe negated several of its benefits. Mr. Cañedo forced me to remove eight of our products, like vanilla, cinnamon, bee's honey, etc. because they were not included in the modified bill we were given in that [Mexico City], saying that we were not authorized to add or eliminate a single word. Applying the interpretation of this to the German treaty has put paid to any future advantages we might have gained in trading with that country.⁸⁹

Despite his efforts to convince the Mexican authorities of the benefits of the Reciprocity Treaty and get them firmly behind it, in Romero's view, the setbacks it had experienced could be attributed as much to decisions taken in Mexico from the outset of negotiations as to the 20 U.S. senators who had voted against it. In the run up to a second vote that would hopefully revert the previous one and result in the ratification of the treaty, President González reiterated his government's intention to extend the same benefits granted to the United States to Germany based on the most-favored-nation clause of the 1882 treaty between the two nations. Consequently, Romero was forced

to write to the Foreign Secretary explaining the Mexican authorities' stance, even though he did not agree with it. That done, he wrote to González expressing his point of view and explaining how his posture could potentially affect the ratification of the treaty:

I have had to communicate to this government your decision on this matter and still try and push the treaty through, but I fear that if you communicate my letter to the Senate or if its contents are somehow leaked, the treaty will fail because I believe one or several senators who would otherwise vote for the treaty will change their minds to prevent Germany being granted the benefits they stand to gain in exchange for broad concessions and this would make the passing of the treaty impossible. This is even more likely now given the bad impression Bismarck's return of a vote of sympathy by the House of Deputies for a liberal German deputy who died in New York has caused here.

The United States will not be affected if Mexico grants Germany the same advantages it has granted them without concessions because it is unlikely Germany can compete with them in the articles covered by the trade agreement. It is Mexico that stands to lose, because it is giving freely to Germany and all other nations what it would give a country in exchange for concessions and because it is permanently closing the door on any possibility of exploiting its proximity to a world-class trading power, to the enormous detriment of its future.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Matías Romero to Mauricio Wollheim, Washington, D.C., February 20, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, f. 470.

⁹⁰ Matías Romero to Manuel González, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1884, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, ff. 507-508.

On March 11, 1884, a plenary session of the U.S. Senate voted for a second time on the ratification of the Reciprocity Treaty and this time it passed. But at a price. Its advocates ceded on a point that would result in its future defeat: before the treaty could come into force, the House of Representatives had to approve it, the argument being that the Executive had initially been authorized to begin negotiations with Mexico by both houses.

But before it could be submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives, the Mexican Senate had to ratify it first. The deadline for this was May 20, 1884, according to the extension negotiated in January. The delays worried Romero because he knew it would be difficult to get another extension. In his view, Chancellor Fernández was more inclined to postpone ratification until the Senate's next period of sessions in September. At Romero's insistence, President González finally sent the protocol for the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States to the Senate and it was approved on May 14, just six days before the exchange of ratifications in Washington. It was thanks to Romero's maneuvering that the deadline was met.

At this point, the treaty had been signed by the representatives of Mexico and the United States in January 1883 and ratified by the senates of both countries in the first half of 1884. All that remained was for the U.S. House of Representatives to ratify it by passing laws for its enforcement. The expectation was that once it was received, the House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means would hand

down a favorable opinion and that a plenary session would vote in favor of it. This was the view of Abram Hewitt, a committee member and representative for New York who had drawn up the report on the Reciprocity Treaty with Mexico and who openly sympathized with the cause. Yet Hewitt's support would not be enough to counter other, less favorable attitudes toward reciprocity that emerged on the U.S. political panorama.

By mid-1884, the United States was not only negotiating a trade treaty with Mexico, but had embarked on talks with Spain (for Cuba and Puerto Rico), the Dominican Republic and Great Britain (for the West Indies), and was discussing an extension of its treaty with Hawaii. Hence it was no surprise the issue topped the agendas of the presidential candidates. The republican Blaine proposed a customs union in the Western Hemisphere, while the democrat Grover Cleveland questioned the effectiveness of such a measure for trade. In the end, the Democratic candidate won, which served to propagate anti-trade agreement attitudes. For example, in early 1885, the senator for Vermont, Justin S. Morrill, said reciprocity agreements were an imposition by the Executive on Congress and as for the treaty with Mexico, he said it would affect U.S. farmers due to the elimination of customs duties and the flight of capital to Mexico.⁹¹ The fire was further fueled by intense

⁹¹ U.S. Congress, *Report from the Central and South American Commissioners, House of Representatives, Congress 48th, 2a session, Executive Document 226, 1885: 513.*

lobbying by sugar and beet producers, who believed their interests would be threatened by the lifting of duties on sugar from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, the West Indies and Hawaii if the reciprocity treaties being negotiated with these countries were passed. It was under these trying circumstances that all three of Hewitt's attempts to get his opinion approved by the Committee on Ways and Means between January and February 1885 failed.

Finally, some months later, in May 1886, the committee approved an opinion against the Reciprocity Treaty by seven votes to Hewitt's one. At a plenary session on July 26, the House of Representatives ruled to postpone a vote until May 20, 1887. This was the third one-year extension negotiated with Mexico so laws for the enforcement of the agreement could be passed. Futile attempts to comply with this requirement no doubt accounted for the lack of interest shown by congressmen, none of whom, including Hewitt, who had tirelessly championed the agreement for more than two years, made any effort to encourage the House of Representatives to call a plenary session and vote on the matter.

The United States may not have directly rejected the Reciprocity Treaty of 1883, but it prevented it from being implemented and the motion ended up being filed away unresolved in the House of Representatives.

During the impasse between the exchange of ratifications in May 1884 and the May 1887 deadline for the coming into force

of the treaty, some sectors in Mexico questioned its implications and expressed their concerns in the press. The most common arguments against it were that the United States allegedly stood to gain more than Mexico and that it was more interested in annexing Mexico than doing trade with its neighbor. Romero replied to many of these articles stressing that opposition to the treaty in the United States was precisely because of the benefits it granted Mexico.

BOUNDARIES WITH GUATEMALA

Another matter of historic importance Matías Romero had to deal with while in Washington was the negotiation of boundaries with Guatemala and the signing of agreements. In this case, Romero not only had the negotiating skills, but the personal motivation to steer these initiatives to a successful conclusion. In addition to first-hand experience of territorial conflicts with Guatemala from his days as a coffee farmer in the 1870s, he had studied the history of these disputes in depth and was personally acquainted with the Guatemalan negotiators, including President Barrios. In this section, we will be looking at Romero's lengthy history and Mexico's complicated relationship with Guatemala. As luck would have it, the negotiations were to be held in Washington, where Romero probably felt more at home as a diplomat than in Mexico City.

In the early 1870s, the border between Mexico and Guatemala had not yet



The Reciprocity Treaty established the introduction of American cotton to Mexico. The Hércules cotton mill near the city of Queretaro, *ca.* 1883.

been marked out with precision. The unification of Chiapas with Mexico in 1824, the occupation of the Soconusco region ordered by Antonio López de Santa Anna in 1842 and its later incorporation into the state of Chiapas were all a major source of tension between the two countries. In 1854, an agreement under which Guatemala would waive its claim over Chiapas and the Soconusco in exchange for monetary com-

pensation was never concluded,⁹² resulting in the frequent illegal occupation of land, while troops were regularly sent in to root out criminals and opposition politicians on the run. Consequently, many believed it necessary to negotiate precise boundaries

⁹² Manuel Ángel Castillo, Mónica Toussaint Ribot and Mario Vázquez Olivera, *Centroamérica* (Mexico, AHD-SRE) (Mercedes de Vega [coord.], History of International Relations of Mexico, 1821-2010, Vol. 2, 2011): 49.

to provide safer conditions that were more conducive to doing business, thereby averting a more serious confrontation.

It was in the Department of El Soconusco, a region bordering with Mexico and Guatemala, that Matías Romero settled in early 1873 after handing in his resignation to Juárez, arguing that his health was declining and that his job as finance minister was exhausting. What he did not reveal was that he had already spent a good deal of time exploring the possibility of investing in agricultural plots in different parts of the country, especially in the Department of El Soconusco in Chiapas. His copious correspondence with State Governor Pantaleón Domínguez, the local cacique, Sebastián Escobar, and many others reveals that he was interested in buying properties in the region to grow coffee, rubber and other crops. Escobar acted as a middleman in the sale of El Malacate. Deemed “the best plantation” in the Soconusco, it was owned by the family of Justo Rufino Barrios, a liberal who was president of Guatemala between 1873 and 1885. The sale did not go through and instead Romero issued instructions for land adjacent to El Malacate to be vacated for what he called his “Cafetal Juárez”. This coffee plantation was on the border of Mexico and Guatemala, although the limits between the two countries remained undefined. On settling in El Soconusco, Romero became friends with Barrios and even helped him draw up decrees on occasion. However, his activism and his interest in

developing the region using federal funds aroused suspicion in Barrios in Guatemala and Escobar in Tapachula. Both men felt he posed a threat to their political aspirations and tried to get him to leave, either directly or indirectly, by damaging his properties and even issuing death threats.

In the case of Barrios, it was the border issue that ended up distancing him from Romero. In mid-1873, when the government of Chiapas tried to register the inhabitants of a border town called Bejucal, the Guatemalan army put up resistance.⁹³ Romero believed the intervention of the federal government was required and requested assistance from Guerra’s secretary, but the SRE’s lack of interest in the region prevented any military action being taken. Nevertheless, the incident underlined the need to negotiate boundaries if a confrontation with more serious repercussions was to be averted.

In October 1873, José María Lafragua invited the Guatemalan chargé d’affaires García Granados to include the border issue on the agenda. Meanwhile, Romero tried to convince Barrios to refrain from any bellicose plan he might have in mind. In January 1874, Barrios agreed to visit Romero at El Malacate on Mexican territory. It was here that he and Romero drew up a draft boundary agreement, which they then sent to the president of Mexico. In the months that followed, Romero continued to face problems: his

⁹³ D. Cosío Villegas, “La aventura de Matías,”: 45-46.

properties were illegally occupied and Guatemalans refused to work on his plantations. In May, the situation became untenable: the crops and fixtures of Cafetal Juárez were destroyed and Romero's workers were arrested.

A couple of months afterwards, the government of Guatemala finally accepted an invitation by Lerdo de Tejada's government to negotiate boundaries. Ramón Uriarte was appointed to represent Guatemala in Mexico, enabling Barrios to make his move on Romero. In early 1875, Uriarte presented the Mexican Foreign Ministry with five volumes of reports of abuse by Romero against the properties and inhabitants of Tajumulco, Altaná and Sibinal in Guatemala and a diplomatic note on the same subject, while the same version was published in Mexican dailies.⁹⁴ In addition to the official response, these accusations by the Guatemalan authorities prompted a detailed rejoinder by Romero, who, offended, published *Refutation of the Accusations of General D. José Rufino Barrios, President of the Republic of Guatemala, against Matías Romero* in 1876.

The attacks continued. In September 1875, a leaflet entitled *The Matter of Limits between Mexico and Guatemala by a Central American* was distributed in Mexico City. The author was Andrés Dardón, who questioned the annexation of Chiapas and Mexico's occupation of El Soconusco, and denied the setting on fire of Cafetal Juárez, although

he omitted to mention that it was owned by Matías Romero:

The fire at Cafetal Juárez is a ridiculous story made up by some neighbor of El Soconusco to distract Mexicans so no one would notice the expedition that was being organized at that very same time in the Soconusco against the Guatemalan government and in which a lieutenant and 100 soldiers from the federation's army took part.

The daily *El Siglo XIX* published Romero's brief reply. In his article, he reproduced the letters he had sent to the SRE asking for access to the files so he could make a better-informed analysis of the border dispute between Mexico and Guatemala:

I believe that if the assertions in this leaflet are not addressed, some very serious charges against the good will of the nation would persist and even cast doubt on the legality with which integral parts of its territory belong to the Mexican Confederation. As such, I feel I would be failing to do my patriotic duty if I did not write this documented and reasoned refutation of said leaflet, satisfied as I am that the assertions it contains are, in general, unfounded.⁹⁵

With the authorization of the SRE, Matías Romero began an extensive investigation into what would turn out to be a detailed

⁹⁴ D. Cosío Villegas, "La aventura de Matías," 38-39.

⁹⁵ Matías Romero to José María Lafragua, Secretary of Foreign Relations, Mexico City, October 4, 1875, reproduced in Matías Romero, "Cuestión México-Guatemala," *El Siglo XIX*, November 12, 1875: 3.

history of the southern border. He spent almost a year researching the subject and published his findings, but he only managed to cover the first decade, from 1821 to 1831. Unable to continue his research because of work commitments, he decided to publish a first volume and commissioned Andrés Clemente Vázquez to continue researching the 1832-1833 period.⁹⁶ And so it was that in 1877 the first volume of *Historic Sketch of the Incorporation of Chiapas and the Soconusco into Mexico* was published.

In October 1875, while Romero was writing up his response to Dardón, José María Lafragua told the Guatemalan envoy that Mexico did not recognize Guatemala's alleged rights over Chiapas and El Soconusco. In 1876, Lafragua's death and political instability in the wake of the Tuxtepec revolt led to the suspension of negotiations with Guatemala. In 1877, when diplomatic ties were reinstated, an agreement was finally reached. In the Preliminary Convention on the Boundaries between the United Mexican States and the Republic of Guatemala, the governments of both nations agreed to set up a mixed commission of engineers to compile a study on the border.⁹⁷ The next year, the commission met in Tapachula to begin work, but there were several

setbacks.⁹⁸ In January 1880, some engineers hired by the Guatemalan government placed border markers in Cuilco Viejo, but since there was no way of identifying them as members of the commission, they were arrested and taken to Tapachula, where they were later released. Toward the end of that same year, the Guatemalan government took a census of Cuilco Viejo on the premise that it fell within its jurisdiction. This, however, violated the 1877 agreement to respect the territory occupied by each country.

These and other such incidents prompted the Guatemalan government to ask the United States to mediate in the demarcation of boundaries between Mexico and Guatemala on June 16, 1881. The petition came in stark contrast to its refusal to set up a commission of engineers to study the border issue as agreed to in 1877. On July 25, 1881, the minister plenipotentiary of the United States in Mexico, John Morgan, met with Mariscal and proposed that the United States arbitrate in the border dispute. As described in a SRE memorandum that was published in the Mexican press, Mariscal replied that Mexico did not agree with President Barrios' version of the facts. Although a series of incidents had occurred on the border, Mexico had been "peacefully and patiently" trying to delimit boundaries for years and, as such, did not view arbitration as a means of settling its differences with

⁹⁶ Mónica Toussaint Ribot and Mario Vázquez Olivera, *Territorio, nación y soberanía: Matías Romero ante el conflicto de límites entre México y Guatemala* (Mexico, SRE, 2012): 112.

⁹⁷ M. Toussaint Ribot, Guadalupe Rodríguez and M. Vázquez Olivera, *Vecindad y diplomacia en la política exterior mexicana, 1821-1988* (Mexico, SRE, 2001): 81.

⁹⁸ "México y Guatemala," *El Siglo XIX*, December 6, 1881: 1.

Guatemala. He also stressed that Chiapas and the Soconusco had been incorporated at the petition of their people.⁹⁹

Support for Guatemala's mediation petition dwindled in the United States in the latter half of 1881 following the assassination of President James A. Garfield in July. Also, James Blaine left the U.S. Department of the State in December and his successor, Frederick Frelinghuysen, had little sympathy for President Barrios' Central American Union initiative. Conversely, he had a close relationship with Romero via General Grant.¹⁰⁰

By early 1882, Guatemala appeared to have assumed an inflexible stance with regard to mediation. Its diplomatic representative in Mexico, Herrera, presented Mariscal with a proposal giving Guatemala possession of Chiapas and the Soconusco. Needless to say, Mariscal rejected it and instead agreed to mediation by the United States, provided it was limited to establishing boundaries without questioning Mexico's rights over these two territories.¹⁰¹

Matías Romero's appointment as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in Washington on March 1882 was, by all accounts, a convenient opportunity to deal with the border issue. Romero wasted no

time and just a few days after he arrived in Washington, he wrote to Frelinghuysen assuring him, without going into too much detail, that Mexico had historic and legal claims over Chiapas and the Soconusco, and that he categorically ruled out all sources of dispute. He then proceeded to outline the situation prevailing in the region in early 1882:

The government of Guatemala has acknowledged and officially agreed, albeit indirectly, on several occasions that the state of Chiapas is part of Mexico, yet it recently asked the United States to mediate in this matter. This mediation was offered to Mexico in a note from the Honorable James G. Blaine, Secretary of State of the United States, addressed to Philip H. Morgan, minister of the United States in Mexico, and dated June 16 in this city.

When the government of Mexico communicated to the U.S. minister resident in that capital—at a verified meeting in Mexico City on July 9—, that Mexico could not submit to arbitration its rights over one of the states of the Mexican Confederation because this was a basic point of its political existence decided by its Constitution, the Honorable Mr. Blaine had no choice but to acknowledge the force of this reasoning and in a letter to Mr. Morgan dated November 28, 1881, he said that the United States was not offering its mediation to determine whether or not Chiapas and the Soconusco were part of the Mexican nation, but to resolve the matter of boundaries between Mexico and Guatemala, based on the premise that

⁹⁹ Ignacio Mariscal, "Memorandum", *El Siglo XIX*, October 20, 1881: 1.

¹⁰⁰ Alfredo Ávila, "Diplomacia e interés privado: Matías Romero, el Soconusco y el Southern Mexican Railroad, 1881-1883", in *Secuencia*, No. 38, May-August, 1997: 67.

¹⁰¹ M. Toussaint Ribot and M. Vázquez Olivera, *Territorio, nación y soberanía*: 57.

the state of Chiapas belongs to the Mexican Confederation.

Once this principle, which, as I have already mentioned, Guatemala itself has acknowledged on different occasions, has been accepted, the physical delimitation of boundaries between the former province of Chiapas and Guatemala and the Mexican states of Tabasco and Yucatán with what is currently the Republic of Guatemala, will require a preliminary study of the terrain, which is largely unpopulated and uncharted. It will not be possible to carry out the delimitation without first conducting this study.

Romero then referred to the agreements of 1877 and admitted the possibility of a dispute settlement process, albeit of a more limited scope. Unlike Guatemala's proposition, he merely considered mediation a recourse for delimiting boundaries between the two nations:

Mexico and Guatemala agreed to appoint a mixed commission to conduct a study of the terrain in a treaty signed on September 7, 1877, in which Guatemala implicitly acknowledged the fact that Chiapas forms part of the Mexican Confederation.

Once the terrain the dividing line should pass through has been reconnoitered and studied, it should be easy to mark it out and Mexico and Guatemala will probably be able to agree on the demarcation of this limit. If, unfortunately, this were not to be the case and it were in the interests of both nations to appoint an arbitrator

or ask a friendly nation to mediate in the resolution of any differences of opinion that might arise on this point, the time to think about how to resolve these would be when they arise, if they arise at all, but to try and determine what should be done in an extreme case that requires prior studies that are somewhat tardy would be premature to say the least.¹⁰²

Frelinghuysen's response was to distance himself from his government's initial posture on arbitration in favor of a negotiated solution between the parties:

I have heard your arguments and can affirm that this government, as you yourself have in essence observed, has not come out in favor of any specific solution to the difficulties between the two governments.

The reports the president received implied the imminent danger of a confrontation between Mexico and Guatemala, which he was desirous to avoid, deeming it a duty by virtue of the ties of friendship the United States enjoys with both disputing parties, by taking up suggestions of peace advisors, including arbitration as a suitable means if the difficulties could not otherwise be resolved. The president is happy to see that the path to the negotiation of a peaceful agreement is open to both nations.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Matías Romero to Frederick Frelinghuysen, Washington, D.C., March 9, 1882, in *El Siglo XIX*, June 21, 1882: 1.

¹⁰³ Frederick Frelinghuysen to Matías Romero, Washington, D.C., March 24, 1882. Published in Spanish in *El Siglo XIX*, June 21, 1882: 1.

In April, Lorenzo de Montúfar, the Guatemalan minister in the United States, rejected a draft agreement drawn up by Romero under which the mediation of the United States would be limited to acknowledging the boundaries between the two countries and would not address whether or not Chiapas and the Soconusco belonged to Mexico. The border dispute and the fact that Herrera and Mariscal were simultaneously negotiating in Mexico created confusion and fueled a situation of unrelenting tension. Consequently, the Mexican Foreign Ministry decided to suspend negotiations between the representatives in Washington, D.C. Nonetheless, Montúfar continued to try and persuade the United States to mediate in a broader dispute settlement process.

The issue took a whole new direction when Guatemala's National Assembly "broadly and extraordinarily" empowered President Barrios to travel to the United States and "settle the matter of boundaries pending with the government of the United Mexican States."¹⁰⁴ As a result, negotiations were relocated to the United States and would be conducted by President Barrios and Romero. It was just over one month after Barrios arrived in New Orleans on July 10, 1882 that a preliminary boundaries agreement was signed. Romero was more than satisfied with the outcome. From his time

in Chiapas in the early 1870s, defining the boundaries between Mexico and Guatemala had been a goal of his, one he had promoted on several occasions, but being in a position to directly defend the nation's interests must have felt like a personal victory of sorts, especially in light of the persecution and false accusations he had suffered a decade earlier, Barrios being one of his harshest detractors. Although such sentiment is not evident in the official documents of the time, in a letter to his uncle, Juan Avendaño, he reveals a more personal opinion:

My victory over Barrios has been complete and much greater than I had reason to anticipate. He has completely surrendered at discretion and it even pities me to see the complete fiasco he has caused.

Tomorrow we will finish him off, because he has agreed to some preliminary clauses that tie his hands completely.

The men he brought from Guatemala are unfamiliar with this terrain and appear small and even contemptible.

This may or may not be recognized in Mexico—perhaps they will never know—, but what I can assure you is that I am not exaggerating in what I say.¹⁰⁵

The preliminary clauses negotiated by Romero and Barrios served as a foundation for the Boundaries Treaty signed by Mariscal and Herrera in Mexico City on Sep-

¹⁰⁴ "El manifiesto del presidente Barrios," *El Siglo XIX*, July 17, 1882: 1.

¹⁰⁵ Matías Romero to Juan Avendaño, August 8, 1892, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, book 42, f. 18.

tember 27, 1882. The first two articles of the treaty shed light on Mexico's stance in the negotiations:

Article I

The Republic of Guatemala hereby forever waives any rights it deems to have over the territory of the State of Chiapas and its District of Soconusco and, consequently, considers said territory an integral part of the United Mexican States.

Article II

The Mexican Republic hereby declares that it duly appreciates the conduct of Guatemala and recognizes that the reasons for the aforementioned renunciation are as laudable as they are honorable, and that, under the same circumstances, Mexico would have agreed to the same renunciation. Guatemala, satisfied for its part with this recognition and this solemn declaration, shall not demand compensation of any kind by reason of the previous stipulation.

By the same token, any reference to arbitration as a means of marking boundaries was left out of the treaty. Instead, article IV stipulated that each country would form a scientific commission and that a term of two years would be granted to determine the dividing line. The Boundaries Treaty was ratified by the Mexican Senate and Guatemala's National Assembly in October and December of 1882, respectively.

According to the provisions of the Boundaries Treaty signed in September 1882, the mixed commission, formed by

the scientific commissions of each country, would be responsible for marking out permanent boundaries, pursuant to the criteria set forth in article III. However, this term had to be extended on four occasions (June 1885, October 1890, October 1892 and July 1894) because of frequent differences of opinion regarding how the provisions of the treaty should be interpreted by the commissions working on the ground. For example, in the late 1880s, Mariscal and Herrera had to sign a specific agreement to resolve a dispute over where the border should cross the Usumacinta River. According to Romero, Mexico accepted the modification proposed by Guatemala so as to avoid any further delays:

On reaching the Usumacinta, one of the border rivers referred to in the treaty, it was discovered that the data provided by Mr. Irugaray, the engineer Guatemala had sent to reconnoiter the terrain before the treaty was signed, was inexact. According to this and the respective document, the Usumacinta should serve as a dividing line from a point very far up its course, which would leave a large portion of what had been considered territory belonging to Guatemala on Mexican territory.

The government of Guatemala contended that the Usumacinta began further down than the agreed point and that, according to the treaty, the dividing line should be the Chixoy River located much further west of the Usumacinta. The Mexican government accepted Guatemala's argument on the principle of fairness and on the

condition no more difficulties were encountered in the definitive marking of the boundary.¹⁰⁶

In 1893, Miles Rock, a U.S. engineer who was a member of Guatemala's scientific commission, instigated another dispute. The boundary unilaterally proposed by Rock extended beyond that agreed to in the Boundaries Treaty of 1882 into forestland where the government of Guatemala had a contract with Casa Janet y Sastré. There were other logging companies in the area, including Agua Azul, Montería Romano and Egipto, all authorized by the Mexican government. The SRE demanded that the Guatemalan government remove the markers built by its commission because it was of the opinion they had been put in place based on a misinterpretation of the terms of the Boundaries Treaty. The conflict escalated the following year when "Miles Rock, leading 50 Janet employees dressed as Guatemalan soldiers, invaded Agua Azul and burned down the rooms and huts there."¹⁰⁷ The Mexican government deemed these actions an invasion of Mexican territory and did not hesitate to send troops to the region. Diplomatic means were used to demand compensation for damages, but President Díaz did not rule out the possibility of going to war with Guatemala.

We are asking that Guatemala pay damages and compensation because of an armed invasion of our territory in which arson was committed, the interests of national companies and foreign ones contracted by Mexico affected and other acts of pillage perpetrated, a fact that was verified many years later, more or less ten in the first instance and 11 in the second, after the 1882 treaty was signed.

[...]

I can assure you that I [Porfirio Díaz] see war as the worst misfortune that could befall us, because it would destroy our financial pillars and the improvements we are currently implementing, and would force us to create a military corps we would have to maintain for many years, just when we were reducing the one that served us in the last war. But unfortunately we are being put in a position where we have to do this, not as the most practicable path, but as the only one that is being left open to us [...].¹⁰⁸

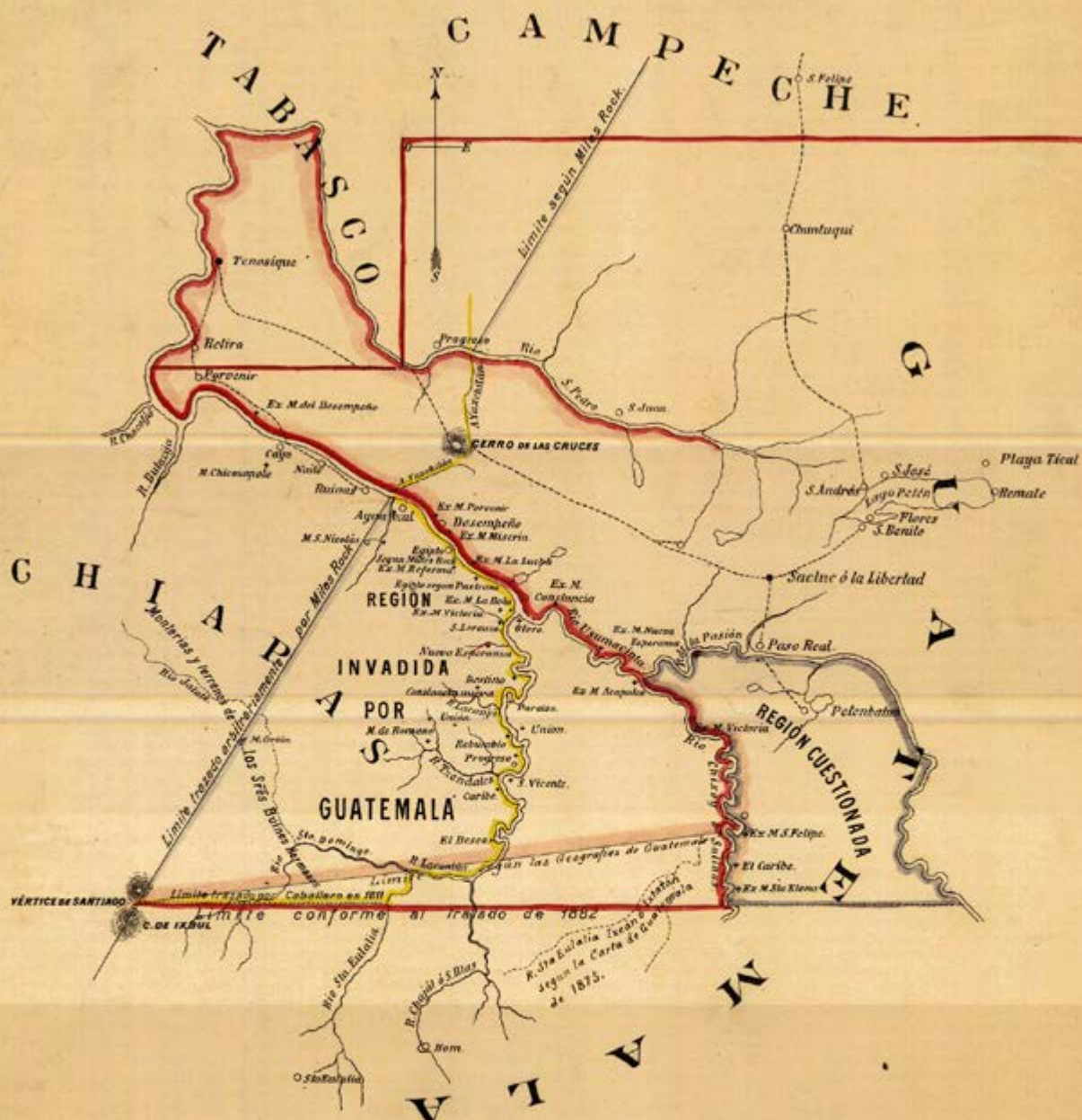
In November 1894, the SRE demanded that Guatemala pay the injured parties compensation, cover the expenses incurred by the Mexican government and dismiss Rock from its commission of experts. President Díaz rejected the arguments proffered by the Guatemalan representative in Washington regarding the boundary marked out by Rock and instructed Romero to convey his government's views:

It is likely that Mr. Lazo Arriaga, influenced by his government, believes Agua Azul, Egipto and

¹⁰⁶ Matías Romero, "México y Guatemala," *Las Nove-dades* [Nueva York], cited in *El Siglo XIX*, November 8, 1894: 2.

¹⁰⁷ Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Mexico City, November 7, 1894, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 44479.

¹⁰⁸ Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Mexico City, November 7, 1894, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 44859.



COPIA DEL CROQUIS DEL INGENIERO MILES ROCK en el que aparece la línea arbitrariamente trazada por éste.

La Zona Verde manifiesta la región que ha sido necesario agregar, según el mapa de Bianconi, para completar aquel Croquis, á fin de dar á conocer las importantes líneas omitidas en él.

La línea azul indica el límite trazado por Miles Rock.

La amarilla, el límite trazado por D. Domingo Caballero en 1811 y el tradicionalmente reconocido, antes del tratado de 1882.

La roja, el límite incuestionable conforme á dicho tratado.

La morada, el que abraza la región cuestionada.

Las monterías que no constan en el Croquis de Mr. Miles Rock, y se han agregado al presente, han sido tomadas de diversos planos y se indican con este signo +

Antonio García Cubas.

San Nicolás belong and have always belonged to Guatemala, but this would require being completely ignorant as to the text of the treaty in force and being unfamiliar with the map [...] where it is clear that, whether you base yourself on the old boundary or the one prescribed by the treaty, the three points mentioned are still on Mexican territory and I say this categorically, in none of the three cases, because if you take the boundary stipulated in the treaty as a starting point, the points in question are still on Mexican territory, whether you take the Pasión or the Chixoy river as the boundary. And even if you take the Lacandon, which is much closer to Mexico and whose boundary Rock did not dare mark out, even then all three points invaded are on Mexican territory.¹⁰⁹

Acting true to form, just as it had done in the 1881 and 1882 negotiations, the Guatemalan government asked the United States to mediate in the conflict with Mexico. Díaz and Mariscal were opposed to the idea and communicated this to Guatemala's diplomatic representative accredited in Mexico, Emilio de León. Meanwhile in Washington, Matías Romero was in close communication with the Guatemalan envoy Antonio Lazo Arriaga and Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham. Maintaining negotiations in both Mexico City and Washington led to imprecisions that earned Romero a warning from the Foreign Minister. During his con-

versations with Gresham, he had admitted the possibility of recurring to arbitration only if Guatemala could prove the territory in dispute had belonged to it prior to the Boundaries Treaty of 1882. This, however, went against the position of the Foreign Ministry and that of Díaz himself, who was opposed to U.S. mediation under any circumstances. A seasoned diplomat as he was, Romero got a slap on the wrist:

Your offer, although it comes with conditions attached, amounted to an announcement on your part regarding that intervention and even your desire to facilitate it, with the government of the United States aspiring to it should the situation arise. You are no doubt forgetting our well-publicized talk about not accepting the intervention of any foreign power to resolve matters in which we believe the decorum and dignity of the Republic to be at stake.¹¹⁰

It should be noted that the Mexican government was not completely opposed to arbitration. Like many foreign policy decisions, it was acting more out of concern as to what the reaction would be on the home front. In a letter dated March 7, President Díaz said as much to Romero and admitted the possibility of mediation by the United States, but only to determine the amount of compensation that should be paid:

¹⁰⁹ Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Mexico City, November 7, 1894, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 44479, pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁰ Ignacio Mariscal to Matías Romero, [reserved letter 5], Mexico City, February 6, 1898, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 44823.

I do not believe the good offices of the United States to prevent a war between Guatemala and us in the least undermines the decorum of the disputing parties, but when the Guatemalans say that war is impossible because the U.S. government would never allow it and the Mexican people and press come to hear of this and their sensitivities are wounded, and when in Mexico the government faces opposition it needs to pay attention to and needs to avoid putting a weapon as powerful as this at its disposal, I believe prudence not only advises but requires us, almost as if it were our duty, to prevent this idea being cultivated, especially when the Guatemalans no longer want to deal with matters directly, but have limited themselves to waiting for the government of the United States to take action and have said as much, avoiding giving answers even to the extent of sacrificing their decorum and logic as they await the supreme sentence.

The gravest difficulty I face is the upright, impartial and just character of the Secretary of State that so fittingly represents that of his government and that I am happy to acknowledge, for I feel it unlikely he will perceive with clarity the motives that incite me to refuse his intervention and I would be very sorry—it would be my worst fear come true—if he were to think that I am avoiding it because I find it disagreeable or that I am not sufficiently appreciative of it. I still hold out hope that the outcome of this vexing matter will give me occasion to demonstrate the contrary. For example, if we were unable to reach an understanding with Guatemala as to the amount of damages that should be paid to the Mexicans and foreigners injured by the invasion, I would not object to submitting the matter to the decision of that government, because it is not my intention to exploit the weakness of our aggressors and I am certain the out-

come of their decision would be more favorable to those injured than any I myself could make. That is how fair I judge them to be, but what I cannot and should not and have never considered doing is to submit to arbitration the dogma of our national honor: in other words, whether the injured parties should or should not be compensated and whether the Guatemalans should or should not make amends for the affront caused, and I would even submit to the justness of that government the form in which amends should be made.¹¹¹

In February and March 1895, Romero held talks with Lazo Arriaga, Gresham and Senator Morgan in Washington, while Mariscal and De León continued to negotiate in Mexico City. In March, the Guatemalan representative announced his government's decision to remove Rock from its commission of experts, thereby meeting a demand Mexico had made in November of the previous year. In the following weeks, progress was made on the negotiation of an arrangement. Finally, on April 1 Mariscal and De León signed an agreement on the border dispute sparked off by the invasion and the destruction of properties along the banks of the Chixoy, Pasión and Lacantun rivers in 1893. As part of the arrangement, Guatemala stated that it had not been its intention to confront Mexico by committing acts of sovereignty on territories west of the Lecanto River (article 1) and agreed to pay

¹¹¹ Porfirio Díaz to Matías Romero, Mexico City, March 7, 1895, BANXICOHA, Matías Romero Collection, Received Correspondence, f. 44911.

compensation to the parties injured by their occupation (article 2). In return, Mexico dropped its demand for payment of expenses incurred during the conflict (article 3), while a note confirmed that its request that Miles Rock be removed from the Guatemalan commission had already been met.¹¹²

The 1895 arrangement marked the end of the most important chapter in the story of Mexico's boundaries with Guatemala. In the years that followed, the individuals affected by the invasions were compensated, initially with the mediation of the U.S. representative in Mexico, Matt W. Ramson, and later, the Duke of Arcos from the Spanish embassy in Mexico. The task of marking out the border proceeded and while the two commissions continued to have differences of opinion, these were all resolved by diplomatic means.¹¹³

For a quarter of a century, Matías Romero played a central role in the border dispute between Mexico and Guatemala. It was an issue he had become familiar with on several levels, had written about and tried to resolve. During this time, he displayed his peacemaking skills, his inclination to study problems in depth and his strategic outlook when it came to proposing solutions—attributes that were acknowledged by his colleagues and strangers alike.

¹¹² "Arreglo entre México y Guatemala," *El Siglo XIX*, April 9, 1895: 2.

¹¹³ Manuel Ángel Castillo, M. Toussaint Ribot and M. Vázquez Olivera, *Espacios diversos, historia en común. México, Guatemala y Belice: la construcción de una frontera* (Mexico, SRE, 2006): 153.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN STATES

Toward the end of his term as minister plenipotentiary in Washington, Pan-Americanism was gaining momentum and Matías Romero had the opportunity to prove himself as a multilateral diplomat. Between October 1889 and April 1890, representatives of 18 American nations met in Washington, D.C. Attempts to create a forum to coordinate all American states had begun decades earlier, when Simón Bolívar called the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama. Similar initiatives took place in Lima in 1847-1848 and 1864-1865, and in Santiago de Chile in 1856, but not much headway was made, either because of the absence of many states or because the agreements reached were not ratified by the governments of the participating countries.

The early 1880s brought with them a new initiative, this time endorsed by the United States. James Blaine, President Garfield's influential secretary of State, proposed a meeting of American nations in Washington. Garfield and Blaine saw the relationship with Latin America as a source of valuable business opportunities and a political necessity in light of the influence the United Kingdom enjoyed in a large part of the region. But Garfield and Blaine's plans were thwarted when Garfield was assassinated a few months after he had taken office. Blaine, a political rival of Vice-president Arthur, resigned as secretary of State



Embassy of Mexico in Washington, 1899.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Porfiriato, Juarez Ave., Mexico City.

three months after the latter assumed the presidency and the conference was canceled.

Nonetheless, Blaine continued to champion the idea of organizing a conference among the business community, diplomats and members of the U.S. Congress. In 1886, under the democratic government of Grover Cleveland, Congress discussed the initiatives of representatives McCreary and McKinley, who proposed calling a conference to foster trade between the United States, Mexico, Central and South America and for the creation of a system for the peaceful settlement of border disputes among American nations.

The initiative was accompanied by a report compiled by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, which indicated that the United States was clearly cut off from the rest of the continent in terms of trade and underlined the economic and, by extension, political weight of the United Kingdom in much of the region.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ See U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record for the House of Representatives*, March 1, 1888, y U.S. Senate, *51st Congress, Reports of Committees and Discussions on Volume IV, Historical Appendix: The Congress of 1826 At Panama and Subsequent Movements Toward a Conference of American Nations* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1890): 314-317.

Finally, in the summer of 1888, President Cleveland asked all of America's other nations to send delegates to Washington in the fall of 1889. A few months later, Cleveland lost the 1888 elections to the republican Benjamin Harrison. Despite the overt protectionist campaign of the Republican Party, once again it was Blaine who saved the conference when he was named secretary of State for the second time.

The conference was attended by 17 Latin American countries, some of which were represented by their ministers in Washington and others by individuals chosen specifically for the task, but no country could boast a representative that had the experience and Washington contacts of Mexico's Matías Romero, who also served as vice-president of the conference.

Over and beyond the individual achievements and failures of each country, what is interesting is the role Romero played at the conference. As previously mentioned, Bernstein credits Romero with the idea of creating a continental mechanism of this kind since the days of the French Intervention in Mexico and if there was one thing he had insisted on at the time, it was the responsibility of United States toward the rest of the American continent, so it would not be surprising had he actively influenced the proceedings. Nevertheless, in the 1880s it was not quite as clear what clout Romero wielded on this issue, for while he had close ties with many prominent members of the Republican Party, Blaine was not among

his favorites and he did not consider him a friend of Mexico.

In any case, there can be no doubt Romero was in favor of the bill and was very clear as to the benefits Mexico stood to gain based on the conference's agenda. Among the issues debated at length were two of an economic nature that were indubitably of interest to Mexico: the creation of a customs union and the issuing of a common silver currency for the entire continent.

Romero enjoyed three significant advantages over the other Latin-American delegates. Firstly, a look at the conference minutes reveals he knew the U.S. political system better than any of his peers—something he used to his advantage several times during the conference. Secondly, as he himself would later explain, one of the main problems was the language barrier. Very few Latin-American delegates spoke English and only one from the United States could understand Spanish. On several occasions, the debates had to be suspended while the speeches were translated. This, however, was not a problem for Romero. And thirdly, he had over 30 years' experience negotiating with the representatives of other governments, something that could not be said of, for example, the U.S. delegation.¹¹⁵

The customs union bill was thrown out almost immediately, because the members of the commission that had been set up

¹¹⁵ See International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference/Actas de la Conferencia Internacional Americana* (Washington, D.C., 1890).

Porfirio Díaz,
Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos,

A todos los que las presentes vieren, sabed:

Que considerando conveniente la celebración de un tratado de amistad comercio y navegación, entre los Estados Unidos Mexicanos y el Imperio de China, y teniendo entera confianza en la ilustración y patriotismo del Señor Licenciado Don Matías Romero, Enviado Extraordinario y Ministro Plenipotenciario de la República en los Estados Unidos de América, he venido en nombrarle, como por las presentes lo nombro, Plenipotenciario de la República Mexicana para que en unión del Plenipotenciario designado por Su Majestad el Emperador de China, ajuste un tratado de amistad, comercio y navegación entre ambas Naciones, prometiéndole por mi parte mantener firme y estable, y ejecutar puntualmente cuanto en esta virtud se pactare, previa la aprobación del Senado, según lo previene la Constitución federal de la República.

En fé de lo cual, expido las presentes, firmadas de mi mano, autorizadas con el sello de la Nación y refrendadas por el Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de Relaciones Exteriores en México, á los veintinueve dias del mes de Noviembre del año de mil ochocientos ochenta y cinco.



Porfirio Díaz

Jos. Mariscal

Silver Ties

Since colonial times, Mexico's finely minted silver currency had paid its own way in the East, mainly in China and India. Throughout the nineteenth century, this flow of silver coins—the country's main export—continued with English trading companies acting as intermediaries. In 1874, Francisco Díaz Covarrubias and Francisco Bulnes made an astronomical expedition to Japan, from where they traveled to China. On their return, they both insisted that trade relations should be forged with China. In 1881, President González called on the SRE to establish diplomatic relations with China and on November 21, 1885, President Díaz approved Matías Romero's appointment as minister plenipotentiary of Mexico to negotiate a friendship, trade and navigation treaty with his Chinese counterpart. By this time, there was growing interest in hiring Chinese laborers, mainly to work the land and build railways. In the second half of the 1880s, negotiations between Romero and the Chinese representative Zheng Zarou came to a fruitless end. In the 1890s, fluctuating silver prices was another issue of interest to both China and Mexico and in 1897, a year before his death, Romero helped draw up a draft treaty that was signed by his successor Manuel Aspiroz and Wu T'ing Fang two years later. On July 4, 1900, Ambassador Aspiroz informed the SRE that the Chinese emperor had ratified the treaty on March 26, 1900. Nonetheless, he recommended that Mexico refrain from signing it due to the "extreme severity of the oriental issue." In light of the assassination of the German minister in China, Aspiroz believed the ratification of the treaty by Mexico could be construed as a vote of support for the Chinese Empire when an inevitable conflict with European powers was looming on the horizon. Consequently, the treaty was never ratified by Mexico.¹

¹ Vera Valdés Lakowsky, "México y China: del Galeón de Manila al primer tratado de 1899," *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, Vol. 9 (1983). The citation of Aspiroz is taken of Manuel Aspiroz to Secretary of Foreign Affairs, July 4, 1900, GEADH, AEMUS, file 75, case file 1, ff. 38-39.

to study it realized it would be virtually impossible to implement for two reasons. Firstly, because the majority of countries in attendance depended on tax revenues from foreign trade and would not therefore be willing to reduce customs barriers, even in the case of a multilateral agreement. And secondly, because all those present, including the representatives of the United States, felt that the U.S. government would not be willing to cast aside the protectionist policy championed by the Republican Party.¹¹⁶

Even so, there were major differences of opinion within the commission itself. The representatives for Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and the United States argued that, while they recognized the practical difficulties of creating a customs union at that moment in time, this did not rule out the possibility of one being successfully implemented in the future. In the meantime, these same representatives proposed American states enter into bilateral reciprocity agreements. Conversely, Chile and Argentina rejected the bill outright. They were also opposed to the idea of recommending reciprocity agreements and criticized the radical protectionism of the United States.

Romero defended Mexico's position, which was in line with the majority opinion, and explained in detail how the U.S.

political system functioned and how it alternated between protectionist and free-trade inclinations:

The economic issue has taken a political overtone in the country [the United States]. One of the large parties it is divided into fervently adheres to protectionist ideas, while the opposition is in favor of a reduction in the customs duties in force, for the reasons already indicated. The last elections for president and representatives to the U.S. Congress were won by the protectionist party, whose economic system was one of the cornerstones of its political campaign and, in the opinion of many, its election victory can be attributed to this principle [...].

Given this state of affairs, it is easy to understand why the country's general mood has not been in favor of free trade, but, conversely, to maintain duties on imports of foreign goods as they are.¹¹⁷

At the end, Romero partially agrees with Roque Sáenz Peña, the delegate for Argentina and the country's future president:

For this reason and others I feel it is not necessary to go into, because they are common knowledge and it would take too long to mention them all, I am convinced that public opinion in the United States is not yet ready to adopt liberal-oriented foreign trade measures, not even with the sister republics of this continent.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference*, Act 44: 293-335.

¹¹⁷ International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference*, Act 44: 293-335.

¹¹⁸ International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference*, Act 55: 573-574.

Clearly the least important thing on Romero's agenda was the creation of a continental customs union. An opinion in favor of reciprocity treaties was more attuned to Mexico's commercial interests and an opportunity to campaign for a new bilateral agreement that improved on the Reciprocity Treaty of 1883. The result of the conference, especially with Mexico and the United States voting for the same motion, would later prove to be an effective means of pressuring for such an agreement.

The other major economic issue was the U.S. proposal that the continent adopt a common silver currency. On this point, too, consensus was reached almost right away. The general opinion was in favor of the initiative, but problems arose when it came to deciding how such a monetary union would be implemented. There were two proposals, both of which were put forward by members of the U.S. delegation. The first was to call another conference at which three representatives would be elected to oversee the functioning of the union, while the nations represented would be at once entitled and obligated to mint coins in compliance with the standards approved at the conference. The second was that all member countries of the customs union deposit their silver with the United States, whose Department of the Treasury would then issue silver certificates that would be accepted in the United States and all other participating countries, functioning, for all effects and purposes, as a common curren-

cy. The debate lasted several sessions until finally the U.S. delegation was forced to take a single official stance following complaints from the other participants. In the end, a plan very similar to the first proposal was approved, although some major decisions, like the legal tender of this continental currency, were put off for a later conference called for this specific purpose.

Although we do not know if Matías Romero had a hand in drawing up the conference agenda, we do know that no nation had more vested interests than Mexico in seeing silver adopted as a common currency. Since the 1870s, silver prices had been declining and the only thing that could revert this trend was a substantial increase in demand. Even so, it would have been a political error for the Mexican delegation to take such an obviously biased stance based on the country's position on the silver market. In a speech recorded in the conference minutes, Romero downplays the benefits the adoption of a silver currency would have for Mexico:

Mexico has no special, much less urgent interest that would lead it to propose or resort to extreme measures to push silver prices up, although clearly any increase in price would be to its advantage.

The drop in the value of silver has had what, at first sight, might seem like a paradoxical but nevertheless tangible effect in Mexico: that of establishing an incentive equivalent to the rate of depreciation of silver, which is

currently 33 percent, in favor of exports of other Mexican products, which has resulted in a substantial increase in the production and exportation of agricultural produce.¹¹⁹

Romero then went on to conclude:

This simple explanation of the current state of affairs in Mexico illustrates to the Conference that, as far as my country is concerned, there is no pressing need or any urgency whatsoever to take extreme measures to reestablish the price of silver, and that we can wait as long as necessary for the trading ratio between silver and gold to reach 15.5 to 1, which, in my view, will occur in the not-too-distant future.

The adoption of an international silver currency would cause us another very serious problem. As the Conference is aware, the Mexican currency is finer and weighs more than that of any other nation in the world, reason why, since it was created, it has circulated as legal tender and at its nominal value virtually everywhere, especially in China and other oriental nations [...].

It is not likely the nations of America will agree to adopt an international currency of the same fineness and weight as the Mexican peso, because such a currency would be worth more than their own, which would not be so fine and would weigh less, thereby contributing to its depreciation. If a currency of the same fineness and weight as the coins of the United States were adopted, which are the same as those of several

other American States, then Mexico would have two silver currencies: the international one, with the agreed weight and fineness, and the Mexican one, which would weigh more and be finer, and this difference in fineness and weight between two currencies of the same value, minted in the same country, would most certainly be the cause of serious confusion.¹²⁰

In the end, the bill for the monetary union would not be approved by the conference, but there can be no denying Romero's diplomatic flair gave it a glimmer of hope.

Another issue on the agenda was the creation of a dispute settlement mechanism.¹²¹

Mexico's position on this point was complicated to say the least. The main purpose of the initiative was indubitably to force the United States, the most powerful country on the continent, to commit to a continental arbitration system. But Mexico faced a serious dilemma: accepting a mechanism of this type would be potentially useful in the event of a conflict with the United States, but would most definitely be used by Guatemala to resolve the border dispute with Mexico. Romero managed, with admirable grace, to keep Mexico walking a fine line of ambiguity during the debate. So adept was

¹¹⁹ International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference*, Act 53: 544-547.

¹²⁰ International American Conference, *Minutes of the International American Conference*, Act 53: 544-547.

¹²¹ For the Mexican position and the terms of the discussion in the conference around these issues, see Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado, "I Conferencia Panamericana (Washington, 1889-1890): prolegómenos para un derecho internacional americano," in Carlos Marichal (coord.), *México y las Conferencias Panamericanas, 1889-1938. Antecedentes de la globalización* (Mexico, SRE, 2002).

he that he attracted the attention of José Martí, who was covering the conference for the press in Argentina and other countries. Judging from what he wrote about Romero's speech, Martí appeared to have grasped his strategy: "And so the intention of the speech reveals itself. Mexico will not say it is opposed, nor will Mexico commit".¹²²

The International Conference of American States was, quite probably, the high-

¹²² José Martí, "La Conferencia de Washington," *La Nación*, May 31, 1890, cited in M. Romero, *La Conferencia Internacional Americana* (Mexico, Imprenta del Gobierno en el Ex-Arzobispado, 1890): 71.

est point of Matías Romero's career as a diplomat. His knowledge of the U.S. political system, together with his mastery of the English language and his close ties with influential U.S. politicians and diplomats represented in Washington enabled him to effectively, but discreetly defend the interests of the Mexican government. The conference did not yield the results its main promotor, Blaine, had expected, but Mexico still managed to further its agenda. A decade later, another conference would be held and this time it would be hosted by Mexico City.

José Martí, Matías Romero and the Washington Conference

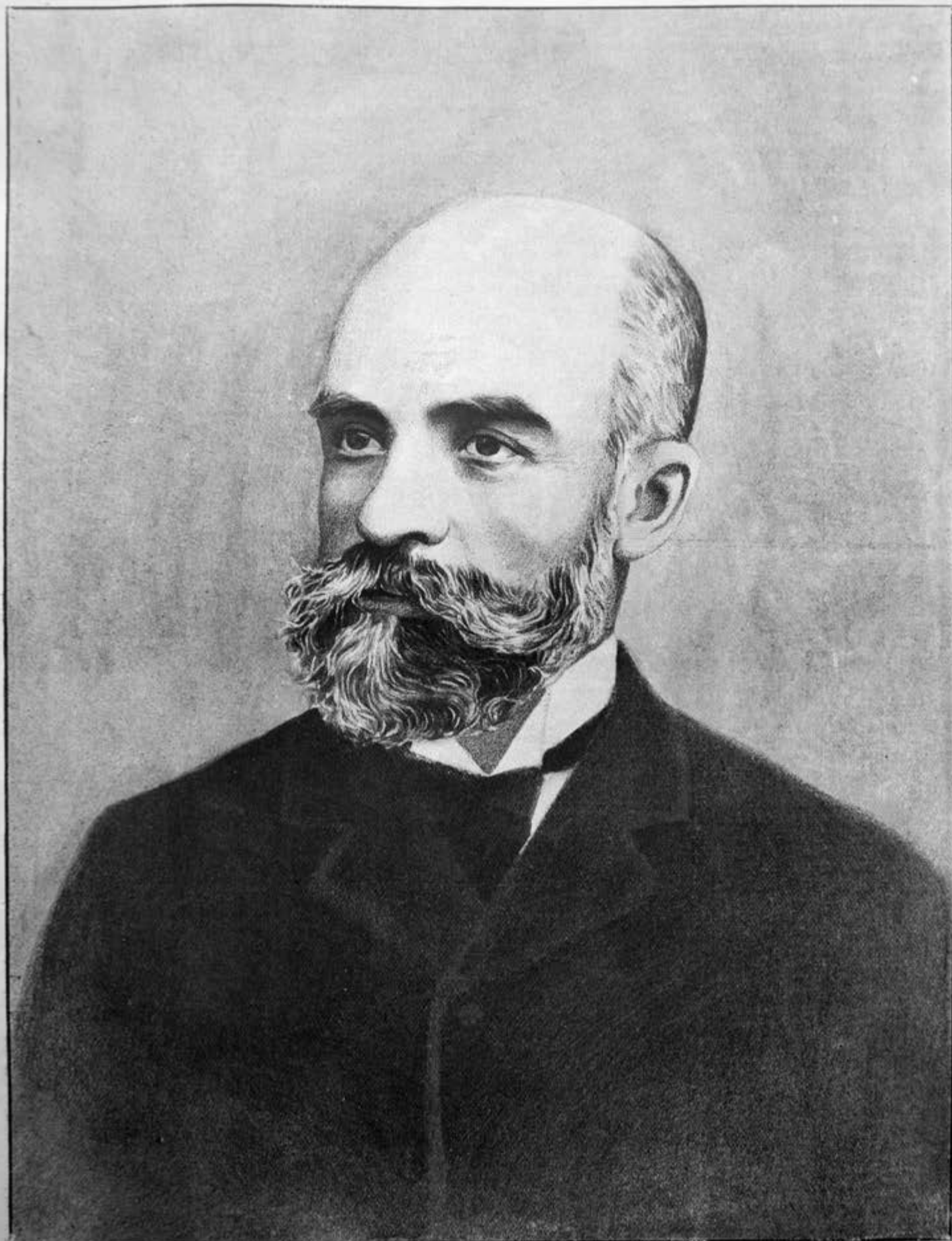
As a journalist, José Martí covered the International Conference of American States. On April 18, 1890, he wrote the following article on the diplomatic strategy of the Mexican representation for the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación*. Romero reproduced the article in the book he published in his defense after he was criticized in Mexico for his performance at the Conference.

Then Mexico spoke. How much has been said about Mexico! Some say they “do not understand Mexico!” Others that “Mexico is doing everything it can.” Others that “Mexico knows more than us.” Mexico, affable and blandiloquent, goes from chair to chair, gathering information and investigating, remaining more silent the more that is said. Some cannot fathom “Romero’s prolixity.” Another said this: “His astuteness is see-through and needs to be covered in a veil.” Another says: “But Mexico has neither dragged its feet at the Conference nor made any enemies.” Some say “it is the statesmen that yield results.” Others: “It is the methods.” “Will Mexico back Chile, as they say, and vote against arbitration?” “They say Chile is angry because Mexico is no longer on its side.” “Will it vote or not?” “Who knows!” And when Romero unrolls his “typescript”, as they call the typewritten copies, the presbyopic observer can see they are covered in extensive notes repeated in tiny, continuous handwriting. He reads like one who slithers. His voice rings of sincerity.

What can be lurking under that simplicity? Neither belligerence nor fear. Arbitration is a case of law and he talks at length and in detail, as if it were a lawsuit. In his preamble, he tiptoes over politics like one walking on eggshells. He is pleased that seven nations of America, among them the United States, have submitted a bill for the abolition of war. “As a man of peace and a representative of a non-aggressive nation” he is delighted that, in resolving the differences arising between the nations of America, “brute force” may be replaced by dispute settlement procedures similar to those used by individuals in comparable cases, “albeit with the modifications required by independent nations.” However, he regrets he cannot vote with the other delegates whom he fears have perhaps gone too far. It is not that Mexico is against arbitration. No. And it is not that the indications given him by Mexico say this, that or the other, although he has his instructions, “but that when dealing with an issue as delicate as this, it is more prudent to take steps that, even if they are smaller, are more likely to be safer.” He lets drop the news that the United States has offered Mexico an arbitration agreement. In principle Mexico accepts: “the difficulty lies in establishing

the exceptions.” And so the intention of the speech reveals itself. Mexico will not say it is opposed, nor will Mexico commit. Some articles he agrees with; others he does not. And there is no need to look for hidden reasons behind the ones he does not agree with because he gives the ones he has, even if they seem insignificant. Appearances do not matter, as long as the homeland is served. He plows on with his speech, article by article. In the exceptions to mandatory arbitration he wants to include cases that, even if they concern borders, “directly affect the honor and dignity of the rival nations.” “Without this addendum, Mexico’s delegates cannot vote on the article.” He does not believe it very prudent to submit ongoing cases to arbitration—perhaps to keep Chile happy? He does not deem it necessary to specify who can be arbitrators—perhaps to keep the United States happy? As for the number of arbitrators, which, according to the bill, will be one per nation, he believes the “case is new” and that it could be unfair to one of the parties when there are more than two disputing nations and several are of one opinion and have as many votes as nations, while the other is of another opinion and only has one vote. He lauds the appointment of a third arbitrator before the arbitrators begin to study the case, but does not think the third one should be excluded from court. As regards the place, majority vote and sharing of expenses, he agrees with the provisions of the bill. He labels superfluous the article that leaves it to the discretion of rival nations the right to consent to other dispute settlement rules. The 20 years are acceptable. The ratification provisions could be improved upon. In short, he will approve the articles “he has been instructed to approve” and those that, broadly speaking, are of the same tenor. As for the others, “maybe he will receive new instructions in time.”¹

¹ Cited from Matías Romero, *La Conferencia Internacional Americana* (Mexico, Imprenta del Gobierno en el Ex-Arzobispado, 1890): 70-71.



EL SR. LIC. DON MATÍAS ROMERO,

PRIMER EMBAJADOR DE MÉXICO EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS.

† EN WASHINGTON EL DÍA 30 DE DICIEMBRE DE 1898.

Colophon: The Death of the Ambassador

In 1898, Matías Romero published a book in English that was intended to be an introduction of sorts to Mexico for U.S. readers and that brought together many of the articles he had written for the U.S. press over the decades.¹²³ The book included detailed geographical descriptions of Mexico, an extensive historical overview and a series of explanations on key postures of the Díaz government on certain issues. Although it was not the author's intention, the preface resembles a lengthy farewell by a man who knew both countries better than anyone:

I feel constrained to say that my stay in Washington has been so long, and my acquaintance with the leading public men of this country so intimate, that I can state with truth that I know a great deal of the unwritten history of this country, which if carefully collected would afford material for very interesting personal memoirs.¹²⁴

Romero was 61 and well aware that he had insider knowledge of the United States. He also understood that disagreements between the two countries were based primarily on prejudices on both sides: “My experience in dealing with two peoples of different races, speaking different languages and with different social conditions, has shown me that there are prejudices on both sides, growing out of want of sufficient knowledge of each other”.¹²⁵

¹²³ M. Romero, *Mexico and The United States: A Study of Subjects Affecting their Political, Commercial, and Social Relations, Made with a View to their Promotion* (New York and London, G.P. Putman's Sons, 1898): v.

¹²⁴ M. Romero, *Mexico and The United States*: v.

¹²⁵ M. Romero, *Mexico and The United States*: vii.

Toward the end of his preface, Romero defends himself from his critics both present and future:

On account of my long residence in the United States, the greater part of my life having been spent here, many people in Mexico, and especially those who are unfriendly to this country, have thought that pleasant and agreeable associations may have imperceptibly influenced and controlled my judgement and methods of thought. While this belief may be perfectly correct, in so far as a full knowledge and appreciation of the American people and their institutions and tendencies is concerned, it is not true that I am the less jealous of the rights and interests of my own country. The peculiar position which I thus occupy enables me to judge correctly of the conditions of the two countries, and of the manner in which such obstacles as are in the way of a better understanding of each other may best be removed.¹²⁶

Lula Romero passed away on July 29, 1898. Romero asked the foreign minister, Ignacio Mariscal, for a leave of absence and returned to Mexico City to bury his wife. A few days before going back, Mariscal and Díaz decided to turn the Mexican legation in Washington into an embassy and chose Romero as Mexico's first ambassador to the United States.

On November 29, 1898, Mariscal, who had been Romero's colleague since the days

of Juárez's nomadic government, officially informed him of his new appointment:

The President, in light of your highly valued services to the Republic, as well as your aptitude and other qualities that make you fitting, has appointed you Ambassador of Mexico to the United States of America. Said appointment was confirmed at yesterday's session of the Senate and I am therefore pleased to inform you, for your knowledge and gratification, and take this opportunity to send you my sincerest regards.¹²⁷

Romero replied immediately accepting the position:

I am extremely grateful to the President for the honor he has bestowed upon me by appointing me to this post as prestigious as it is difficult, and returning his trust, I shall leave tonight for Washington, where I will do my utmost to perform my duties to the best of my abilities.¹²⁸

A few days later, on December 5, 1898, Romero wrote to the U.S. Secretary of State John Hay to inform him he had returned to the city and of the Mexican government's decision to appoint him ambassador. William McKinley's government responded in kind, upgrading the status of its legation into an embassy in Mexico and appointing Pow-

¹²⁶ M. Romero, *Mexico and The United States*: vii-viii.

¹²⁷ Ignacio Mariscal to Matías Romero, November 29, 1898, GEADH, LE-1038, f. 89.

¹²⁸ Matías Romero to Ignacio Mariscal, November 29, 1898, GEADH, LE-1038, f. 90.

ell Clayton as the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico.¹²⁹ This was surely a personal victory for Romero, who went to great lengths to ensure the accreditation ceremonies took place simultaneously as a symbol of the strengthening of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Porfirio Díaz's absence from Mexico City delayed matters, but finally, on December 21, both governments

confirmed that the ceremonies would take place on January 3, 1899 at 10:30 a.m.¹³⁰

Romero wrote a draft speech for the occasion and sent it to the State Department in good time, but a few days later he died of appendicitis without having been accredited. And so it was that the first Mexican ambassador to the United States never got to take office.

¹²⁹ Matías Romero to John Hay, December 5, 1898, GEADH, LE-1038, f. 96.

¹³⁰ David Hill to Matías Romero, December 21, 1898, GEADH, LE -1038, f. 120.

An Ambassador's Unintended Letter of Farewell

Matías Romero was the first officially appointed ambassador of Mexico to the United States, but he never got to be an acting ambassador because he passed away unexpectedly on December 30, 1898, four days before he was due to present his letter of accreditation to the government of William McKinley. But because the ceremony had initially been scheduled for the second week of December, he had written a draft of the speech he intended to give at the ceremony that never took place. It was found among his papers at the legation:

Mr. President,

I am honored to present you with a letter from the President of the United Mexican States accrediting me as extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of the United Mexican States to the government of the United States of America.

The government of Mexico, which holds the friendship of that of the United States in the highest regard, is desirous to give its official representation in Washington first-class status, out of the consideration the United States is due and because relations between our two sister and neighbor republics necessitate such representation.

Nature has put our two countries on the same continent, next to each other along an extensive border, with extended coasts washed by the same waters, and has given each products the other needs. I believe this indicates that our two nations, while populated by different races, are destined to cultivate ties of friendship, develop strong trade relations and contribute in concert and by example to the progress and civilization of the American continent. In this respect, the United States, with its prodigious development and whose population, industry and wealth have established it among the leading nations in the world, has special duties to fulfill.

I am honored that my government deems me worthy of representing it in this high-ranking position before the government of the United States, and it goes without saying that I shall spare no effort to further my government's goal of strengthening relations between the two countries, an undertaking that cannot succeed without the valued cooperation of Your Excellency and the government you preside over.

On presenting my accreditation to Your Excellency, I vow to be vigilant of the personal happiness of Your Excellency and the wellbeing and prosperity of the people of the United States.

Señor Presidente:

Tengo la honra de poner en Vuestras manos las
Cartas Credenciales del Presidente de los Estados Uni-
dos Mexicanos que me acreditan como Embajador Extraor-
dinario y Plenipotenciario de los Estados Unidos Mexi-
canos ante el Gobierno de los Estados Unidos de Améri-
ca.

El Gobierno de México, que aprecia en alto
grado la amistad del de los Estados Unidos, ha querido
dar á su representacion oficial en Washington el carac-
ter de primera clase, tanto por la consideracion que le
merecen los Estados Unidos, cuanto porque las relacio-
nes entre las dos Repúblicas, vecinas y hermanas, ha-
cen necesaria esa representacion.

La Naturaleza ha colocado á nuestros dos pai-
ses en el mismo Continente y contiguo el uno al otro
por una gran extension de territorio, con amplias cos-
tas bañadas por los mismos mares, y ha dado á cada uno
producciones de que el otro necesita. Esto indica, á
mi juicio, que las dos Naciones, aunque pobladas por
distintas razas, están destinadas á cultivar amistosas
relaciones, á desarrollar un gran comercio entre si y

á contribuir de consuno y con su ejemplo al progreso y
civilizacion del Continente Americano. Los Estados Uni-
dos que, con su prodigioso desarrollo, han llegado á
ser por su poblacion, industria y riqueza una de las
principales Naciones del Mundo, tienen á este respecto
deberes especiales que cumplir.

Es muy honorífico para mi haber merecido la
distincion de mi Gobierno de representarlo en este al-
to puesto ante el Gobierno de los Estados Unidos, y me
parece excusado manifestar que no omitiré esfuerzo al-
guno por realizar los propósitos de mi Gobierno de es-
trechar las relaciones entre los dos paises, en cuya
empresa no podria obtener buen resultado sin contar
con la cooperacion ilustrada de Vuestra Excelencia y
del Gobierno que preside.

Al presentar á Vuestra Excelencia mis Cre-
denciales, hago sinceros votos por la felicidad personal
de Vuestra Excelencia y por el bienestar y prosperidad
del pueblo de los Estados Unidos.

Es copia. Washington, Diciembre 5 de 1898.

José P. Godoy
Secretario.

Los funerales del Sr. Lic. Don Matías Romero,

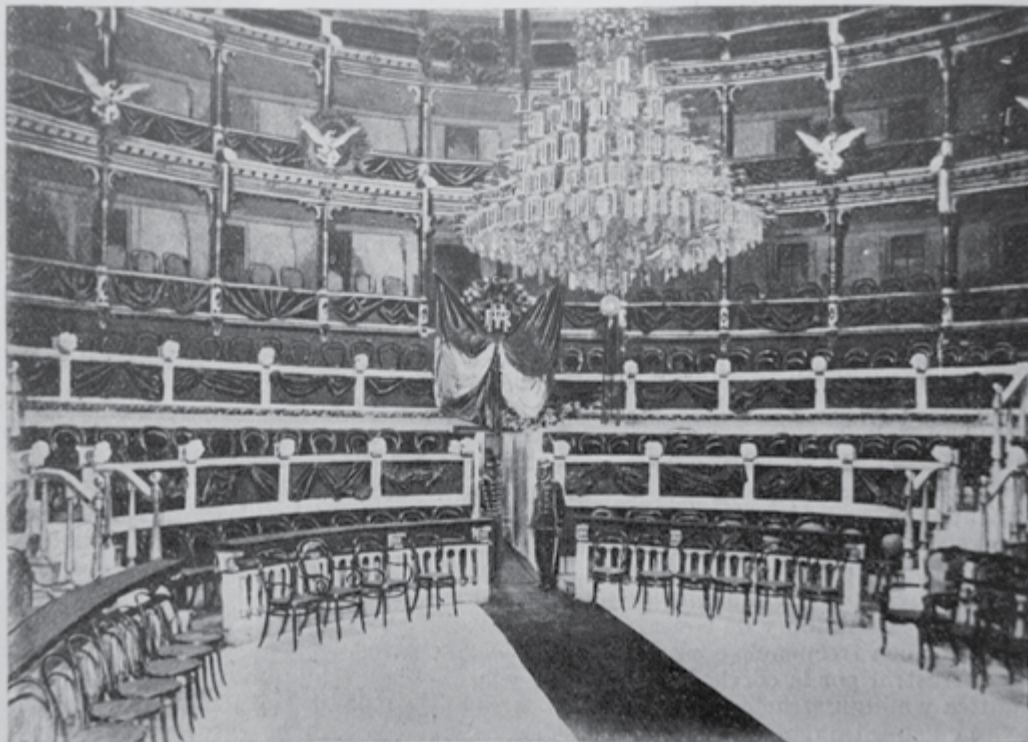
Primer Embajador de México en Washington.



LA CAPILLA ARDIENTE.



LLEGADA DEL CORTEJO A LA CAMARA DE DIPUTADOS.



LOS FUNERALES DEL SR. LIC. D. MATIAS ROMERO.—INTERIOR
DE LA CAMARA DE DIPUTADOS.



CAPILLA FUNEBRE DEL SR. EMBAJADOR LIC. DON MATIAS ROMERO.
(EN EL PANTEON DE DOLORE".)

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Index of images

Cover *Matías Romero*. Photo Library of Genaro Estrada Historic Diplomatic Archive, box 9, envelope 10.

Page 16 *Matías Romero, retrato, grabado*. Casasola Archive. © 227468 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 19 Augustus Koch. *Bird's Eye View of Eagle Pass Maverick Co., Texas*. Lithograph (hand-coloured), 1887. Image courtesy of Amon Carter Museum of Art, Fort Worth, Texas. 1982. 10.

Page 22 *Edificio del Instituto de Ciencias del Estado de Oaxaca, vista parcial*. s/f. Casasola Archive. © 182246 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 23 *Instituto de Ciencias y Artes, calle de la Independencia, Oaxaca, fachada*. s/f. Casasola Archive. © 455025 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 24 Matías Romero to Secretary of Foreign Relations, Mexico City, December 1, 1855, Genaro Estrada Archives of Diplomatic History (GEADH), Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1038, f. 4.

Page 28 *Lic. Matías Romero, portrait*. Cruces y Campa. © 454212 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 30 Casimiro Castro. "Valle de México (tomado desde el cerro del Risco)". Lithograph. In *Álbum del Ferrocarril Mexicano*. Mexico: Victor Debray & Cía., 1877, print XXIV.

Page 31 Pedro Gualdi. "Catedral de México". In P. Gualdi, *Monumentos históricos de México*. Mexico: Imprenta Litográfica de Masse & Reaen, 1841.

Page 33 Matías Romero to Mr. Minister of Government in charge of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, Veracruz, January 3, 1859, GEADH, Expediente personal de Matías Romero, LE-1038, f. 10.

Page 38 Melchor Ocampo to Matías Romero, Veracruz, December 20, 1859, GEADH, Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1038, f. 17.

Page 42 Francisco García. *Veracruz, tomada en globo*, photograph of a lithograph of Casimiro Castro, ca. 1850, Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra-Servicio de Información Agropecuaria y Pesquera, 2440-OYB-7261-A.

Page 46 *Pintura al óleo de cuerpo completo del presidente Benito Juárez en el recinto a Juárez del Palacio Nacional*. Mexico City, Fototeca Constantino Reyes-Valerio of the National Coordination Office for Historic Monuments of INAH, Photo album 2, vol. V, photo 1: photo negative no. DLI-68. CONACULTA-INAH-MEX. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 48 *Matías Romero, portrait*, Felipe Teixidor. © 452976 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 52 L. de F. informs to Matías Romero his designation as Secretary for Finance, January 15, 1868, GEADH, Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1037, f. 2.

Page 54 "Rama, flor y fruto del cafeto. Dibujo botánico de Miguel Carmona Virgen". In Matías Romero [1877]. *El café de Uruapan*, introduction and texts selection of Gerardo Sánchez Díaz. Morelia: Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo/Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas/Morevallado Editores, 1999.

Page 60 *Matías Romero, embajador en Estados Unidos, portrait*, Casasola Archive © 26888 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 63 Ignacio Mariscal informs to Matías Romero his designation as Minister Plenipotentiary of Mexico to United States, January 29, 1885, GEADH, Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1039, f. 29.

Page 64 Ignacio Mariscal informs to Matías Romero his designation as ambassador of Mexico to the United States, 29 de noviembre de 1898, GEADH, Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1038, f.89.

Page 71 *Arms of Cuba. Armas de Cuba, ca. 1869*, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, D.C. 20540 USA, reproduction number: LC-DIG-pga-02436 (digital file from original print), 2016.

Page 74 A. Meyer. *View of Washington Looking down Pennsylvania Ave. Toward Unfinished Capitol. National Hotel on Left, no. 2*, watercolor over graphite underdrawing, 1860, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, D.C. 20540 USA, reproduction number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-23071 (digital file from original print), 2016.

Page 78 William Hernry-Jackson. *Hercules Cotton Mill near Queretaro, Mexico*, photograph, ca. 1883-1891, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, D.C. 20540 USA, Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection, reproduction number: LC-D43-T01-1128 (digital file from b&w film dup.), 2016.

Page 87 Antonio García Cubas. *Copia del croquis del ingeniero Miles Rock en que aparece la línea arbitrariamente trazada por éste*, printed map over coloured paper, photograph, s/d, Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra-Servicio de Información Agropecuaria y Pesquera, 1073-OYB-7261-A.

Page 91 “Edificio de la embajada mexicana en Washington”, lithograph published in *El Mundo*, February 5, 1899, p. 104.

Page 92 *Edificio del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores en la época del porfiriato. Avenida Juárez, Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México*, Mexico City, Foto-

teca Constantino Reyes-Valerio of the National Coordination Office for Historic Monuments of INAH, photo album 4, vol. XIX, photo 1: photo negative no. 1770-49. CONACULTA-INAH-MEX. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

Page 94 Porfirio Díaz appoints Matías Romero as Plenipotentiary of Mexican Republic to adjust a treaty of friendship, commerce and navigation with Chinese Empire, November 22, 1885, GEADH, Embassy of Mexico in United States Archive, record 75, file 1, f. 2.

Page 102 “El Sr. Lic. Don Matías Romero, primer embajador de México en los Estados Unidos. † en Washington el día 30 de diciembre de 1898”, lithograph published in the cover of *El Mundo*, January 8, 1899.

Pages 107-108 Matías Romero's speech in occasion of presentation of his credentials to government of William McKinley, copy signed by José F. Godoy, secretary of the Mexican legation in Washington, GEADH, Matías Romero Personal File, LE-1037, ff. 98-99.

Page 109 “Los funerales del Sr. Lic. Don Matías Romero, primer embajador de México en Washington”, lithograph published in the cover of *El Mundo*, January 22, 1899.

Page 110 “Los funerales del Sr. Lic. Don Matías Romero-Llegada del cortejo fúnebre a la Cámara de Diputados”, lithograph published in the cover of *El Mundo*, January 22, 1899.

Page 111 “Los funerales del Sr. Lic. Don Matías Romero-Interior de la Cámara de Diputados”, lithograph published in the cover of *El Mundo*, January 22, 1899.

Page 112 “Capilla fúnebre del Sr. Embajador Lic. Don Matías Romero (en el Panteón de Dolores)”, lithograph published in the cover of *El Mundo*, January 15, 1899.

Page 116 *Matías Romero, primer embajador de México en los Estados Unidos, portrait, photoengraving*, Casasola Archive. © 227433 SECRETARIAT OF CULTURE. INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO. REPRODUCTION AUTHORIZED BY INAH.

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