

Alvaro Obregon and His Policy

By E. J. DILLON

IN the course of a varied experience in most parts of the globe during the long span of time between the close of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Peace Conference I have come into contact with most of the statesmen, rulers, and leaders of men whose deeds and endeavors have made contemporary history. The list includes Bismarck, Gambetta, Gladstone, Crispi, Chamberlain, President Kruger, the Marquis Ito, Disraeli, Roosevelt, and Venizelos, and most of the prominent public workers of the present day. And I can honestly say that none of them impressed me so powerfully or so favorably from the point of view of leadership, single-mindedness, and that elusive quality which occasionally goes by the name of grandeur as the Mexican reformer of whose existence and aims the people of the United States are only now beginning to have a vague inkling.

Alvaro Obregon is a born leader with whom love of justice is a consuming passion, and duty the highest law. A man of sterling character and of a humane and sympathetic temper, he combines the fervor of the idealist with the capacity of the organizer, and his solicitude for the well-being of the masses is the driving force of his public and private activities. His words are acts and his promise the beginning of achievement. His respect for truth in all its Protean shapes and singular surroundings is almost tantamount to worship.

Before I had the advantage of meeting Obregon I had heard much about him from eminent Americans—experts all of them on Mexican affairs—to whom the principal sources of information public and private were easily accessible. And the portrait which I drew from the data thus liberally supplied was the reverse of attractive. Later on when I came to know him as he is I perceived that the data were fabrications and the portrait a sorry caricature.

I should like, were it possible, to ascribe the circumstantial and false information volunteered to me by my informants to what Goethe termed the dangerous ease with which a great man's contemporaries usually go astray about him. "That which is uncommon in the individual bewilders them," the poet adds, "life's headstrong current distorts their angle of vision and keeps them from knowing such men and appreciating them." But it is to be feared that the true explanation lies elsewhere.

My first visit to Obregon took place while I still believed that he was one of the least reputable types of the class ridiculed in the United States as the Mexican bandit general. Primed with this idea I called on him one afternoon at his hotel in Mexico City. His ante-chamber was filled with typical representatives of the despised poverty-stricken masses with whom he was hail fellow well met. He inquired what he could do for me. I answered, "I merely wish to know how you intend to deal with the problems of recognition, of Mexico's debts, of foreign claims for losses, and kindred matters, when, as now appears certain, you will have entered upon the duties of President." "My answer is simple," he replied laughingly. "Mexico will pay all her debts and satisfy all the just claims of foreigners. As for recognition, I cannot admit that that is a Mexican problem. Foreign states will recognize the lawful government of the Republic in accordance with the law of nations. That is all. You

would not suggest, would you, that any of them will make a new departure?" I arose, said that I would not trespass further on his time, thanked him for his reply, wished him good afternoon, and left.

Next day a friend of his informed me that the General would be pleased to see me again, to have a more satisfactory talk with him, adding that he had been under the impression that I was one of the numerous callers whose aim was to ply him with futile questions and then to comment adversely on his answers. He intended to start in two days for his home in Nogales and would gladly receive me any time before his departure. I said that I would not trouble the General further now but might possibly be in Nogales myself in a few weeks when I would take the liberty to call on him. The next day I received an invitation to accompany him on his journey to Nogales and after a few hours' deliberation I accepted it.

On that journey and on our many subsequent travels I had a rare opportunity to study General Obregon in the various lights shed by adventures pleasant and unpleasant, exhilarating and depressing. I saw him in his native place surrounded by his family and his kindred. I conversed with his earliest teachers and his schoolmates. I observed him as a candidate for the Presidency and listened to over a hundred of his electoral addresses, always with a keen sense of aesthetic enjoyment and at times with admiration for his fairness and generosity as an antagonist. To my knowledge he possessed documents which if published would have debarred certain of his adversaries from ever again appearing on the public stage. But he declines to make use of them during the elections or indeed later unless the behavior of the authors should oblige him to make known their misdeeds.

Obregon is a man of the people, a proletarian of the proletariat, a lack-all who worked his way up from the lowest rung of the social ladder to the highest by dint of intense painstaking while preserving his 'scutcheon from blot or stain. Whatever he set his hand to, that he persevered in until he accomplished the task. As a simple workman he labored with might and main to the satisfaction of his employers, who soon gave him a post of trust and responsibility. As a farm hand and farmer he acquainted himself with agriculture in most of its branches until his qualifications enabled him to render a lasting service to the whole state in which he was born. Combining mechanics with agricultural industry, he invented a sowing machine which is employed today in various states of the Republic. Political conditions constraining him to abandon his peaceful existence and his ideal family life, he became a soldier and applied himself so intensely to the requirements of his new profession that he finally ended this uncongenial career with the triumph of the popular cause and the well-deserved reputation of a genial military strategist as well as a most successful organizer.

Obregon is one of the very few men I have met—Venizelos is another—on whom power and rank have no further effect than that of sharpening their sense of responsibility. In all other respects he is as he was. Keren-sky the Russian lawyer whom the turn of fortune's wheel

raised to the highest post in Russia had his head turned dizzy and his estimate of values upset by the all too sudden change. In the Czar's luxurious apartments he is said to have attired himself in magnificent costumes and to have striven to add a cubit to his mental and moral stature by the aid of the cast-off finery of the former autocrat. Obregon is a man of a wholly different cast of mind and type of character. He owes everything to himself, nothing to artifice. In virtue of his unbroken military successes, his moral rectitude, and his transparent sincerity he wields an extraordinary sway over the spirits of his countrymen; and he uses this for the purpose of inculcating among them faith in the great emancipating principles of right and wrong, respect for law and individual right, and a striving after freedom with order and administration with integrity.

Those aims underlie Obregon's foreign and domestic policy, and nothing that he undertakes or achieves will be found to run counter to any of them. His fiscal measures, his political program, his attitude toward the State Department in Washington are all practical corollaries of these principles and aspirations. In this way he has imparted to the new generation of his countrymen a powerful impulse in the direction of substituting veracity and moral rectitude for old-world politics and diplomacy. He knows better than any of his contemporaries the nature and gravity of Mexico's wounds and infirmities and also the efficacious remedies which he is ready to apply. That knowledge embraces the entire problem and includes every detail. He perceives the needs of each district and their relation to those of the entire state, those of each state and their relation to the Republic, and those of the entire Republic in the frame of the community of nations. In a word, he is endowed with the gift of seeing things in true perspective, in which they are seldom, if ever, surveyed nowadays on this or any other continent.

Obregon's presence is the embodiment of unaggressive strength and quiet natural dignity. His glance is searching and is often accompanied by a mental, almost perceptible, effort to complete the impression which he is receiving from the words of his interlocutor by inspection of his motives. Optimism is usually depicted in his mien, tone, and language, but it is the optimism of the man who having struggled against vast odds and won feels himself specially favored by circumstance and inspired by past experience. He is cautious withal by temperament, enthusiastic by reflection, persevering on principle. While preaching high ideals he rates at its just value the poverty of the soil in which he is sowing them and is prepared to content himself with a proportionate harvest. In his theories there is no room for staggering misgiving, and from his action he banishes hesitation. "Vacillation spells failure," is one of his everyday sayings. While guided by experience, he is not self-opinionated; his inquiries are broad, his mind open, and his prejudices are neither many nor insuperable.

Obregon's moral code, like that of the Japanese, is interlaced with what is known in Spanish lands as the *punto d'honor*, and for this as for that he is ready to make the supreme sacrifice. He is neither vain nor conventionally modest, simply proud with that legitimate pride which springs from consciousness of duty performed and his role well played.

As an orator he deserves high rank for qualities which are innate and are therefore often belittled by those who lack them. He discards the usual artificial aids and speaks

briefly, simply, and to the point. His every discourse is a message. He has the knack of imparting to his hearers a direct interest in the matter dealt with. And however homely the subject, he views it with a mind permeated with a sense of the larger issues of which it is an integral part. Obregon knows the crowd much better than the individual. None the less he is often strikingly right in his judgment of individuals, which is mostly intuitive, but when dealing with personal friends his intuition is sometimes paralyzed. He is then blind to defects that are almost obvious.

One afternoon in Tehuacan General Obregon and I had a long talk about his plans of reconstruction and the principles that would govern them. And here is a concise note of the conversation which I jotted down immediately after for future reference:

He is resolved to substitute morality for politics. Recognizes power only as a means to an end—the end to be the good of the community. The making of laws is easy and the belief is common that by statutes you can right every wrong. But what counts more than the wording of an act of Congress is the integrity of those who interpret and administer it. Never hesitate in a crisis. If you take a resolution carry it out with might and main. If you are dubious give it up altogether, and if convinced that it is the right thing to do tackle it even though you have no hope of achieving it and persevere even though failure should stare you in the face, for it is not only what you have actually done but also what you would do that counts.

Mexico will find her right position, not through aloofness from world affairs, but rather by recognizing the essential unity of humankind and the need of developing the resources of each country for the benefit not only of the nation that owns them but also of humanity. Hatred of foreigners is a curse to the people who indulge in it, as history shows. Foreigners are the needed cooperators of Mexicans and should therefore be cordially welcomed.

Such in brief is the man who is striving to reconstruct the southern Republic today. During the few months that have elapsed since he entered upon his official duties he has accomplished much and has prepared the ground for much more. For the first time in history Mexico is now on the right road. Revolution has ceased and peace is firmly established. The factions that for years kept the country plunged in chaos are appeased. The outlook is most promising. The only lever by which the Republic can at present be thrust back into the quagmire of meaningless strife is of foreign origin. And the only apparent motive for using this fatal lever is a crazy infatuation for a hollow form.

General Obregon cannot purchase recognition by a treaty. He can and will discuss a treaty when he is recognized. To sign a political compact would be to violate the constitution and his oath, and to insist that he shall be a law-breaker and a perjurer in order to qualify himself for recognition is hardly in accordance with President Harding's public professions. President Harding said, "I want America to stop and turn its face forward not only for the achievements which we may bring ourselves, but also that we may play our part in showing the world the way to a righteous settlement."¹

Now, there is apparently little righteousness in a demand which would make President Obregon a criminal, divorce him from his people, and establish and sanction a foreign veto on the domestic legislation of his country.

Side by side with this incitement to a breach of the con-

¹ Address to the District of Columbia Bankers' Association, April 20, 1921.

stitution comes the demand of the oil interests that the State Department withhold recognition on the ground that the President is not observing the constitution as they interpret it in the matter of taxation. They contend that by levying the recent tax on oil exports he is violating their reading of that charter. Thus he is at one and the same time called upon to violate the constitution in one of its prescriptions at the demand of the State Department and to accept the oil companies' interpretation of another of its injunctions and adjust his policy to that.

In order to comply with these conflicting dictates a constitution ought to be specially framed for the behoof of foreign investors and its interpretation left to their judgment. Mexico's role would be to listen and obey.

A comment on President Obregon's telegram to the *World* attributed by the press to Mr. E. L. Doheny² is worth noting as indicative of the singular method of reasoning by which President Obregon's refusal to sign a treaty before recog-

² *The World*, June 28, 1921.

nition is assailed. What Mr. Hughes, Mr. Fall, and Mr. Doheny allege is that assurances given by Obregon that the rights of American citizens will be protected would bind only General Obregon. Therefore they are valueless. And yet Mr. Doheny in his comment says: "The question for Mr. Obregon to answer is: Do you intend to confiscate the rights of American citizens? If not, by what course of reasoning can you refuse to so state publicly and over your own signature before recognition of your Government by the United States Government?" The obvious reply is—by the simplest and most forcible method of reasoning known to the logician. If Alvaro Obregon were to make and sign that statement before recognition it would bind Alvaro Obregon and nobody else. Another reason, as Mr. Doheny knows, is that a good deal more than that simple statement has been and is being demanded by the State Department. Among other conditions President Obregon is summoned to violate the constitution and to be false to his oath.

And these conditions are unacceptable.

The Truth About the American Legion

By ARTHUR WARNER

VII. PUBLICITY, OFFICIAL AND OFFICIOUS

COMING into existence, as it did, when propaganda had been raised to the *n*th degree, it is natural that the American Legion should have centered much of its attention upon publicity. Its chief means has been the official organ, the *American Legion Weekly*, the first number of which was dated July 4, 1919. Bellicose, blatant, and bellying, the *Weekly* undoubtedly played a principal part at that formative period in turning the Legion from a legitimate fellowship of former service men into a heresy-hunting, business-controlled "strong arm" squad. The *Weekly* began to see red in the second number, and talked nothing but vermillion for the next six months. That second number led off with an article on Bolshevism by the now forgotten but then resplendent Ole Hanson, while left and right at the top of the editorial page were discussions of *The Red Autocracy and Seeds of Discontent*. From the former one culls such sentiments as: "The unbalanced temperament of virulent Slav radicalism can introduce no ideals of social conduct or government which Americans will care to accept," while of discontent we are assured: "The man who was in the service wants to better his condition, of course, and he wants to better America. But he has his own ideas—American ideas—of how this will be done." On November 14, 1919, an editorial entitled *Give Them a Sea Voyage* announced:

This season of the year one recalls the voyage of the Mayflower, which brought seekers of freedom to these shores. It is time for a return trip, bearing enemies of freedom from the same shores. . . . Thousands of their ilk ran around loose during the war, and while 4,800,000 Americans were in the fighting forces and the vision of the nation was fixed on the war, they were sowing the seeds of destruction and anarchy and laying the fires which they hope may make a Russia of the United States. They are not much of a menace in view of the new Americanism. But they are a beastly nuisance. Blast the crop. Stamp out the fires which already are being lighted. Run the Reds out from the land whose flag they sully. Cleanse the country of the skulkers whose insane ambition is to wreck it.

Along with, and doubtless growing out of the pursuit of the "red," began the hounding of the alien, in which the *Weekly* led the pack. Considering that America is the immigrant, that our accumulated industrial prosperity and our present standard of living is the direct creation of the foreign-born, this manifestation, which spread like a yellow fog over the country and is not yet dissipated, is one of the most cruel and surprising drifts of popular hysteria in our history. The *Weekly* began with a drive against the "alien slacker"—the man who had taken out first papers toward naturalization but canceled them in order to avoid conscription—demanding that he be deported. In Oregon the Legion gave the names of such persons to their employers and to the press, and the *Weekly* gloried that thus their existence was made "uncomfortable generally." With these individuals was presently confused any alien who used the neutrality of his country as an excuse for not joining the fighting forces—as thousands of Americans in Europe did previous to our entrance into the war. Thence it was an easy step to the hue and cry against all foreigners. On October 10, 1919, an editorial entitled *Oust the Aliens* said:

An official demand has been made for the names of all aliens employed by the War and Navy Departments. Congress will be asked to demand their discharge. It is time to clean the Government's books of all aliens. There is an ample supply of American citizens to conduct the United States Government in all its details, functions, and ramifications. And there are now enough intensely American Americans to see that this is done in the future.

The American Legion certainly had an indirect responsibility for stirring up the passions that led to the tragedy in Centralia, Washington, on Armistice Day, 1919. Instead of repenting, however, the Legion capitalized the occurrence in its attack on radicalism the country over, and after the verdict of the court the *American Legion Weekly* perpetrated what can hardly be regarded as anything but a deliberate incitement to violence. It will be recalled that the verdict found seven of the defendants guilty of murder in the second degree. In other words the jury decided that