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Nations and nation-building in the Americas, 1787–1867

The revolutionary era in the Americas had ended by the second decade of the 19th century but peace was short-lived. The new nations had hastily redrawn the map of the Americas which created new tensions igniting three decades of border conflict from Canada to Argentina. Internally, the newborn nations were challenged to establish peace, order and prosperity. The revolutions brought sovereignty but not stability. The critical issue was adopting and implementing a system of government that promised both political stability and the promotion of revolutionary ideals. Three forms of government would emerge: democratic republicanism, constitutional monarchy, and dictatorship. Canada had a parliamentary confederation responsible to Great Britain. The United States adopted a republican form of federal government. Brazil had a constitutional monarchy. Mexico went from dictatorship to constitutional monarchy to republican government. While there were many variations throughout the Americas, an important point was the division of powers between the states or provinces.

Due to the huge geographical expanse and topography, as well as the variety of European colonial powers and local populations, the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean was far more complex than that of Canada and of the United States. The colonial Spanish viceroalties and captaincies-general were gone, replaced by new nations or groups of nations, with new borders. The Portuguese colony of Brazil became a monarchy. The French colonies remained, with the exception of Haiti and its violent slave rebellion and independence revolution. Some Spanish colonies seized by the British and the Dutch in the Caribbean remained colonies until well into the 20th century, and some, even to this day. Elaborating a form of government suitable to each nation was a long, arduous process. Much the same as in the northern part of the Americas, people debated on who would hold power and how this power would be distributed, as well as which groups would be excluded from power (like slaves, Native Americans, *mestizos*, immigrants, women, the poor, the illiterate). A few ideologues debated what role revolutionary ideals would play in creating new nations and what influence traditional colonial values and beliefs, notably race, religion and social class would exert in this process.

The tug-of-war in Latin America and the Caribbean between liberals and conservatives would be decisive and in many ways different from the same conflict in the northern part of the Americas. Liberals in Latin America and the Caribbean were influenced by the Enlightenment and the US Revolution and espoused a free-trade economy, a republican form of government, rule of law, hierarchical and limited civil rights and a reduction in the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Conservatives wanted to keep the link between church and state and implement reforms slowly, ensuring traditional colonial institutions and structures that benefited the advantaged position of the élites in the particular nations. The conflict was not easily resolved and the search for

stability and prosperity would be long and difficult: in some countries solved for long periods and then upset, in others a balance would not be reached until late in the century and at a great social cost. Still other nations would alternate between the two factions often enough to paralyze any real social or economic progress.

In many new countries in the former Spanish colonies, revolutions were restricted to the political élites regardless of political ideology, as the plight of the slaves and Native Americans remained the same at first. Eleven Latin American nations had freed their African slaves between 1824 and 1869. Where slavery was never a very important economic base for plantations or mines, it was abolished early on; but where it was entrenched in wealth production, like the United States, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil, it continued, sometimes until late into the 19th century. It is difficult to generalize about the treatment of Indian and mixed-race populations, given the large area and the 20 core nations in question. Countries like Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (at first part of the nation of Central America), Bolivia and Perú (with large Native American populations), kept them disenfranchised until the 20th century. Argentina and Chile, much like the western United States, engaged in actual wars against Indian populations in the southern cone. Countries with larger *mestizo* populations (like Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador and others) incorporated these populations into the body politic, although social and cultural restrictions often remained in place. Most countries excluded the poor, landless and illiterates of any color or mix from the power élites.

This chapter will focus on the challenges and problems that came with independence, through an examination of the important developments that took place in the Americas between 1787 and 1867. During this period, the political map of the region was carved out. An examination of the various attempts to bring domestic stability to these new nations and experiments in government and constitution will also be examined. Examples will include Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States. The chapter will examine the important wars, major events and key leaders who shaped the Americas during this period.

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- understand the philosophical underpinnings, major compromises and changes in the US political system embodied in the Articles of Confederation (1783) and the Constitution of 1787
- assess the challenges to the establishment of political systems in Latin America through analyzing the conditions for the rise of and impact of the *caudillos*
- address the causes and impact of the War of 1812 on British North America and the United States
- explain the causes and effects on the region of the US–Mexican War, 1846–48
- assess the causes, challenges, events, and leaders in the period 1837–67 that resulted in Canada's confederation; the 1837 rebellions in Canada, the implications of the Durham Report (1839) challenges to the confederation; the British North America Act of 1867; and the effects of various compromises, unresolved issues and regionalism
- evaluate the impact of nation-building on the social position and living conditions of Native Americans, *mestizos* and immigrants in the new nations during the this period.

Independence achieved

The 13 colonies in British North America started the independence movement and ousted the British after a bitter struggle by 1783. The challenge was to create a constitutionally based system of government that enshrined the revolutionary ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The first attempt, the Articles of Confederation, lasted only five years. The issue was determining an acceptable division of power between the **federal government** and the 13 states. Two camps emerged in the debate: The **Federalists** wanted a strong central government, reduced power of the states and opposed a Bill of Rights. The **Anti-Federalists** opposed a strong federal government, believed the states must hold the balance of power and promoted a Bill of Rights. At times the debate was rancorous and polemic but more often it was thoughtful, philosophical and inspiring. Eventually the "Great Compromise" resolved the crisis, a Bill of Rights was added and the constitution was ratified by the 13 states. With the constitutional crisis resolved, a confident United States of America entered an energetic period of economic prosperity, industrialism, immigration and westward expansion. The United States was poised to expand across the continent. Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase of 1804, one of history's shrewdest land deals, added the Mississippi basin and settlers poured over the Appalachians into the fertile region planting cotton, tobacco and wheat and igniting a new wave of western expansion. Forty years later, the Oregon boundary settlement with Great Britain made the 49th parallel the northern border of the United States. The annexation of Texas (1845) started an unpopular war with Mexico that added the future states of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Colorado and parts of Wyoming. The continental map of the United States increased tremendously. Mexico's territory, on the other hand, was reduced by half upon losing the war.

It is important to point out that independence from European colonial powers was not uniform all over Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, Caribbean island nations like Puerto Rico and Cuba remained colonies of Spain until the end of the 19th century, and became a haven for royalists escaping South American nations, as did the Dutch colony of Curaçao which held Venezuelan exiles. Today's Dominican Republic was occupied by neighboring Haiti until 1843, and was a Spanish colony again until 1865. Most of the West Indies (French, British and Dutch) remained colonies in the 19th century.

In some newly independent Latin American nations, stability remained elusive. In the former Spanish colonies the revolutionary wars created 18 new nations, but the new borders would not last. By mid-century, the lack of clear boundaries in the former Spanish and Portuguese Empires, in addition to geographical imperatives and different population groups and power élites, resulted in the establishment of 23 nations. In many of these countries, finding an effective system of governance that created consensus between

A federal system of government is a division of powers between a central government and local (state or provincial) governments.

The **Federalists** championed a strong federal government with an elected congress and protection of states' rights in the Senate. They opposed a Bill of Rights.

Anti-Federalists wanted the states to control the federal government and an entrenched Bill of Rights.

competing factions and ideologies was elusive, even for the élites. In addition, the destruction caused during the wars of independence, especially in Venezuela, Uruguay and Mexico, was a huge setback for these countries. In Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil regionalist disputes escalated to internecine battles between factions grappling for national power. All over the Americas, two powerful ideological groups wrestled for control of the new nations—**liberals** and **conservatives**. Liberals championed the revolutionary ideals of the enlightenment—liberty, fraternity and equality—in theory, but rarely in practice. They believed in republican forms of government, free trade, a market-driven economy, separation of church and state, rule of law and a limited franchise (voting rights). Conservatives, represented the colonial legacy and wanted to keep many of the old ways; strong ties between the state and the Roman Catholic Church, élite privilege, a hierarchical social structure, tariffs to protect local economic power and colonial landholding laws. It should be noted that most of the discussion and conflict between these two groups was concentrated among the élite, comprising less than 10% of the population in many countries, who were the only part of the population able to wield power.

Across the Americas and most of the Western world, liberal philosophies and ideals could not entirely supplant traditional social structures and systems in the 19th century. In the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, the American-born creole élite often replaced the Iberian-born élite and set up new governments based on liberal values of *laissez-faire* economics, republican governments with parliaments and a strong executive and rule of law, based on the Napoleonic Code; an exception to this rule were the British colonies or ex-colonies. Their sense of democracy did not include the lower classes, namely rural peasants and indigenous and African peoples, the landless, and women, who comprised the majority of the population. Constitutional influence came from the French and the US constitutions, to be sure, but recent historiography has pointed to the much more powerful influence of the first modern constitution: the Spanish Constitution of Cádiz of 1812. Although most new nations experimented with republican forms of government, Haiti and Mexico unsuccessfully and Brazil successfully tried monarchies. In some countries, such as Ecuador and Mexico, rural uprisings against the servitude of the feudal hacienda system, or slave rebellions in the case of Jamaica, Brazil and Cuba, fanned the fears of the power élites. In other countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, the promise of order and stability created a new category of leader—the **caudillo**. Building a national consensus that brought stability was difficult, but not impossible. Several nations succeeded: most notably Brazil, Costa Rica and Chile. Here the altercations between liberals and conservatives were held in parliamentary and constitutional debates resulting in a landholder and mercantile élite consensus in the 1840s and 1850s, similar to the situation to the United States and Canada in the 1870s. In other cases, such as Uruguay and Argentina, experiments in republican forms of government failed early on due to conflicts between different provinces; and since no resolution seemed possible through republican institutions, *caudillos* took control at different intervals. These were often charismatic strongmen with

Liberals are middle class intellectuals and revolutionaries who championed *laissez faire* economics, free trade, democratic government and rule of law.

Conservatives maintain the traditional ruling oligarchy of landowners and the Roman Catholic Church. They opposed republican democracy, although some supported constitutional monarchy.

Activity

Liberal vs. conservative

The terms liberal and conservative remain important political concepts, but they had different implications in the 18th and 19th centuries and strong regional and national variants across the globe.

Choose one Latin American country to analyze the enduring impact of liberal and/or conservative traditions, dating from this period, and how they impact on the region today.

Discussion point

Watch *The Price of freedom*, a video documentary written by Carlos Fuentes (Dir. Christopher Ralling) (a Sogetel, S.A. production in association with the Smithsonian Institution, Quinto Centenario España).

How does this video clarify your knowledge of the post-independence leaders and ideologies in Latin America?

Caudillos were local strongmen who emerged in many countries in Latin America after the wars of independence. With military backing, popular support and ruthless dictatorial measures, they ruled for varying time spans, from short periods of months to decades.

the power and money to command private armies. In the early part of the century they were sometimes revolutionary heroes, although they came from different social backgrounds. Often they were rural leaders, with backgrounds as powerful landowners or ranchers, such as Rafael Carrera in Guatemala, Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina, Manuel Isidoro Belzú in Bolivia and José Artigas in Uruguay (just to name a few). The key to their power was control of the paramilitary forces and eventually, co-opting part or all of the nation's military forces. The regime of some *caudillos* was short-lived, like Belzú who only lasted seven years. Others were far longer, like that of Carrera (18 years), Rosas (23 years) and José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia in Paraguay (26 years). The figure of the *caudillo* as a strong military leader would continue to surface in future military dictatorships in Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries.

There was frequently extensive constitutional discussion between liberals and conservatives. Before 1867, there was much constitutional change: in Perú the constitution was changed eight times, six times in the case of Colombia, and nine times in the case of Ecuador. The constitutions that eventually endured tended to be a compromise of liberalism because they still sharply curtailed power and participation and fostered a strong, centralized executive, as a concession to conservatism. The separation of church and state was also a major dividing factor in these two factions. In both the Spanish and Portuguese ex-colonies, the Roman Catholic Church held powerful landholdings and resources, in addition to a monopoly on education. The influence of the church was felt at all levels of the political hierarchy, but it also represented a cultural confrontation between liberals, who felt that it perpetuated rigid class hierarchies and was too rich and powerful, and conservatives, who felt the church was vital to preserving traditional values that maintained a stable social order. Catholicism, as a religion as well as a cultural icon, was deeply ingrained in Spanish and Portuguese Latin America: both in agrarian communities where the rhythm of the seasons and religious observances were inseparable and in urban communities, of all classes, castes and races. Arguably, the church was the only institution to hold sway over each country's entire population; hence they were reviled by liberals for their stance against modernity and courted by conservatives for being a pacifying influence on potentially volatile sections of society.

Then, there is the case of Canada. Canada's road to nationhood was evolutionary not revolutionary. **British North America** comprised six colonies: five predominantly English-speaking, protestant colonies—Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Upper Canada (Ontario)—and Lower Canada (Quebec), which was predominately French speaking and Roman Catholic. The United States had invaded during the Revolutionary wars and the War of 1812. The British questioned the loyalty of French-speaking Lower Canada and transplanted Americans in Upper Canada but these fears proved unfounded. Many fought the invaders or stayed neutral. British North America remained British for different reasons in Quebec. Conservative-minded British political élites known as the “Family Compact” in Upper Canada and the

Discussion point



What is the difference between evolutionary and revolutionary change?

In your view which is preferable and why?

British North America is the term for the British colonies (later provinces) that remained loyal to Great Britain during and after the American Revolution. They include the maritime colonies—Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland—as well as Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (French-speaking Quebec).

“Château Clique” in Lower Canada controlled the colonial governments. They refused to grant **responsible government** to a politically astute middle class who paid taxes but had no voice in the distribution of public monies. By the 1830s, radical charismatic leaders emerged in both provinces and galvanized protest. Frustrations reached a boiling point in 1837 and armed rebellion broke out. The British army made short work of the rebels and the fighting ended by 1838. To prevent further trouble, the British Government sent a respected diplomat and reform politician, Lord Durham, to Canada to sort out the mess. The report that bears his name granted responsible government (a key rebel demand). Less popular was his recommendation that French-speaking Lower-Canada be assimilated. Regardless, Durham’s report set British North America on the road to nationhood and on July 1, 1867, Canada became an independent dominion within the British Empire.

Responsible government is a parliamentary term, and requires that the executive (government) in power is responsible to the elected members of the legislature. It must maintain their confidence to be able to raise and distribute tax revenues. If confidence is lost the executive must resign. The term is frequently used these days to refer to accountable government.