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## "Viva Villa!" Pancho Villa's Motivation for Anti-American Attacks

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## **“Viva Villa!”**

### **Pancho Villa’s Motivation for Anti-American Attacks**

At four o'clock in the morning on March 9, 1916 the small border town of Columbus, New Mexico lay sleeping. A few army sentries, from the local garrison of the 13th Cavalry, were on duty. Reports had reached the town that the notorious Mexican revolutionary and bandit, Pancho Villa, was camped with five hundred men shortly across the border, however few expected anything to happen in Columbus.<sup>1</sup> The night's silence was broken by a single gunshot, within several seconds there was another. The sound of galloping horses erupted with shouts of "Viva Villa!" Now the gunfire increased as five hundred men thundered into the town, shooting wildly and setting fire to buildings. The burning buildings gave off enough light to illuminate the raiders. They attacked from the east and the west in coordination. The U.S. troops soon rallied in the

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence C. Clendenen *The United States and Pancho Villa: A Study in Unconventional Diplomacy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961), 238-239.

north of town and began sweeping south through the town, greatly aided by a machine gun.<sup>2</sup> Roughly an hour after the first shots were fired, the *villistas* fled the town, leaving over 100 Mexicans and 17 Americans dead.<sup>3</sup>

Within a week, on March 15, 4,800 men lead by General John "Black Jack" Pershing entered Mexico in pursuit of Villa.<sup>4</sup> While the ensuing American expedition would prove more an embarrassment to the United States than any harm to Villa, it seems obvious that any attack on the United States would result in retribution brought on the aggressor. Villa, with only 500 men and dwindling support, could not have logically thought that his actions would go unpunished or any successes would outweigh the cost. Scarred by almost six years of war and almost a life time as a bandit, Villa was too canny to have acted irrationally. Many reasons are given for Villa's actions. One says that Villa was driven by hatred of America. Another was to punish a merchant that took money from Villa in exchange for guns and never delivered.<sup>5</sup> There is even one theory that purports Villa did so on behalf of the German government, who hoped to divert United States arm shipments from Britain.<sup>6</sup> However, Villa's motivations for the attack on Columbus, New Mexico was part of a series of violence directed towards Americans in the hope that it would destabilize the Carranza

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Tompkins, *Chasing Villa: The Story Behind the Story of Pershing's Expedition Into Mexico* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1934), 58-54.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Katz, "Pancho Villa and the Attack on Columbus, New Mexico" (*American Historical Review*: Vol. 83 Issue 1 (February 1978), p101), 101.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Stout, Jr., *Border Conflict: Villistas, Carrancistas and the Punitive Expedition 1915-1920* (Texas Christian University Press, 1999),44.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Katz, *The Life & Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 552.

<sup>6</sup> Katz, "Attack on Columbus," 127.

government.

The man that would come to be known around the world as Francisco Pancho Villa was born Doroteo Arango in June 5, 1878 or 1879.<sup>7</sup> Much of his early life remains shrouded in mystery and various myths and legends that have sprung up over the years have only served to complicate the matter even more. What we can ascertain, and what must be held as the most viable, comes from his memoirs. However, Villa could neither read nor write, so his memoirs were compiled by Martín Luis Guzmán based on papers and stories from Villa.

His family were peasant farmers on the Hacienda Gogojito, which was located in the Canatlán municipality, in the Shadow of the Sierra Madres, in the state of Durango. At some point, when is unclear, his father, Augustín, passed away and left the young Doroteo to tend the family farm.<sup>8</sup> He was left as head of the household with his mother, two younger brothers, Antonio and Hipólito, and two sisters, Marianita and Martina.<sup>9</sup> As head of the household, young Doroteo looked for work on a neighboring ranch. But he did so without the permission of the hacienda owner, Don Arturo López Negrete. For this crime, Doroteo was whipped.<sup>10</sup> One day, in 1894, he came home to find his sister, Martina, then twelve, crying while his mother yelled at Don Arturo, "Leave my house, Señor.

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<sup>7</sup> Martín Luis Guzmán, *Memoirs of Pancho Villa* (Translated by Harriet de Onis. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1969), 3 & Manuel A Machado, Jr., *Centaur of the North: Francisco Villa, the Mexican Revolution, and Northern Mexico* (Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1988) support 1878 while Katz, *Life & Times*, 3 argues for 1879. This discrepancy in years, 1878 or 1879, is based on anecdotal evidence from Villa himself. It is quite possible that he didn't even know what year he was born in.

<sup>8</sup> Haldeen Braddy, *Cock of the Walk: The Legend of Pancho Villa* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1955), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Braddy, 17.

Have you no shame?"<sup>11</sup> With his sister dishonored by the Don, Doroteo ran to his cousins house and fetched either his own pistol or his cousins.<sup>12</sup> Shooting three times, the most serious wound inflicted on the Don was a wounded foot.<sup>13</sup> While Don López Negrete was carried home, Doroteo fled on horseback to the Sierra de la Silla.

Due to, as Villa claims, his youthful inexperience, Doroteo was soon caught by three men. The morning before his execution, a guard lead him outside to grind a barrel of *nixtamal*.<sup>14</sup> Doroteo killed the guard with the pestle of the metate and fled back into the mountains. At this point, to avoid further capture, Doroteo decided to change his name. His father, Augustín Arango, was the illegitimate son of Jesús Villa, so Doroteo adopted his paternal grandfather's surname. He became Francisco Villa and, in time, became known as Pancho Villa, a celebrated outlaw of the Villa family.<sup>15</sup>

For his protection, Villa joined Ignacio Parra and Refugio Alvarado, two veteran outlaws. He soon earned their respect by stealing a fine horse from in front of a saloon in broad daylight.<sup>16</sup> The life of an outlaw suited Villa. He liked the freedom and ease it offered over the arduous work of a farmer. The band of outlaws did well. Within a week they had stolen a mule train and Villa had

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<sup>11</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Katz, *Life & Times*, 3 says it is his cousin's gun, while Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 3 says it was Villa's gun.

<sup>13</sup> Katz, *Life & Times*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Braddy, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 6.

pocketed 3,000 pesos.<sup>17</sup> The *banditos* rustled cattle and robbed payrolls and shipments of money from mines in Durango and Chihuahua. One such hold-up resulted in netting the group 50,000 pesos apiece.<sup>18</sup> This allowed Villa to take a vacation from the outlaw business to spend time with his family. The 50,000 pesos, although a vast fortune at the time, did not last long for Villa, only eight to ten months.<sup>19</sup> He spread the wealth to his family, giving his mother 5,000 pesos and other members of his family 4,000 apiece. He also started a tailor shop for a very poor man, Antonio Retana, so he could support his large family.<sup>20</sup> It was here that Villa began to be compared to Robin Hood for his taking from the rich and giving to the poor attitude. On several occasions, Villa tried to leave banditry behind him, but the discriminatory social system of Mexico forced Villa back to crime.<sup>21</sup>

By 1910, the Porfiriato of Porfirio Díaz was drawing criticism for its dictatorial rule. Behind Francisco Madero, those opposed to Díaz rule were uniting and agitating for reform or revolution. From their base in San Antonio, Texas the *maderistas* made appeals to the different strata of society to oust Díaz and replace him with Madero. Don Abraham González, a banker who lost his job when the banks of Chihuahua were consolidated, was charged with organizing an army in Mexico's biggest state. González, who had done business with Villa by buying some cattle of unquestioned origin, asked him to join the revolution.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Although, Machado claims it was 5,000 pesos, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Katz, *Life & Times*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Machado, 14.

Villa agreed to, he saw it as a continuation of the struggle he had been waging against “the exploiters, the persecutors, [and] the seducers” on behalf of the “persecuted and humiliated.”<sup>22</sup>

The fighting was relatively brief. Madero became president in November 1911 and between June 1911 and January 1912, Villa had a period of peace.<sup>23</sup> Mexico, however, was still feeling tremors of revolution. To the south, Emiliano Zapata denounced Madero and in the north, Pascual Orozco, Jr. was baiting his time till he could strike at the new president. With the coup by Victoriano Huerta on February 19, Villa once again took up the cause of revolution against Huerta. Within four months they had overthrown the dictator and the forces under Villa’s command numbered an impressive 90,000 men.<sup>24</sup> Villa allied himself with Zapata in a “Sovereign Revolutionary Convention.”<sup>25</sup> Despite their best efforts, the revolutionary armies of Villa and Zapata were defeated routinely by forces loyal to Venustiano Carranza. Villa was forced to continue the fight as a guerilla.

Felipe Angeles, Villa’s chief strategist, conceded on September 8, 1915 that Villa recognized that his army was now no more than a band of marauders.<sup>26</sup> A month later, most of Villa’s commanders had fled to the United States. Up till now, Villa had had a favorable relation with the United States. The press took a liking to him and painted him as an eccentric character. Throughout the

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<sup>22</sup> Guzmán, *Memoirs*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Machado, 26.

<sup>24</sup> John Womack, Jr., “Pancho Villa: A Revolutionary Life” (*Journal of the Historical Society*: Vol. 2 Issue 1 (January 2002), p21), 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mark Cronlund Anderson, *Pancho Villa’s Revolution by Headlines* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 42.

Revolution thus far, Villa had gone out of his way to protect American business interests in the areas his forces operated. There was even talk in the highest levels of the government of supporting Villa's efforts against Carranza.<sup>27</sup>

However, President Woodrow Wilson balked at backing Villa. On October 19, the United States officially recognized the Carranza government. Upon learning of this, Villa was thrown into an anti-American tirade. He felt betrayed by the United States and vowed to be through with them.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the month, Villa was stealing American cattle and trying to coerce loans from four different American mining operations in Chihuahua. Villa soon unleashed his *villistas* to take direct action against America. On January 10, 1916, After the United States recognized the Carranza government, the American owned and operated La Cusi Mining Company decided to reopen its operations in Chihuahua. Taking a train from El Paso to the city of Chihuahua, Charles R. Watson, the general manager, and his staff transferred trains. Several hours out of the city, near Santa Ysabel, the train was stopped by one of Villa's colonels, Pablo López, and his men. The *villistas* robbed all the passengers of the train then hustled the Americans outside. López was heard to say to the other passengers, "If you want to see some fun, watch us kill these gringos."<sup>29</sup> With a shout of "Viva Villa!" the *villistas* shot the Americans. Watson tried to run, but he too was gunned down. One American, Thomas B. Holmes, managed to escape, but, in all, 17 Americans had been executed by Villa's

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Clendenen, 225.



men.<sup>30</sup> The degree to which Villa himself played a role in the Santa Ysabel massacre is unclear. López is reported to have fingered Villa as behind it, and even that Villa was watching the whole thing. However, this is according to the Carranza government before López was executed.

The Santa Ysabel massacre and the kidnapping and execution of a bookkeeper from the Hearst Ranch in Babicora, Chihuahua the next day, January 11, by *villistas* all point to a concentrated anti-American effort in Chihuahua, the bed of Villa support. These actions, combined with the attack on Columbus, New Mexico, were directed to show how little control Carranza had over Villa's territory. The inability of Carranza's forces to bring Villa in, and the belief that they were too incompetent to do so, precipitated American intervention in Mexico.<sup>31</sup> Villa hoped that the U.S. would withdraw support of Carranza if he could prove how unstable the country was.<sup>32</sup> However, as history proved, it did not. Villa evaded Pershing and outlived the Carranza government. But old wounds heal slowly and on the morning of July 20, 1923, Villa was assassinated, his body riddled with nine bullets, as he was driving his car.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>31</sup> Stout, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Katz, *Life & Times*, 765-766.

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