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MEXICO

by William Weber Johnson

and the Editors of

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COVER: Indians in homespun
rest on a street in Jamiltepec
during a fiesta. Like many
country people throughout
Mexico, they speak little Spanish.

ABOUT THE WRITER

William Weber Johnson first came to know Mexico on college vacations, when he wandered extensively through the land on foot, horseback and riverboat. A native of Illinois, he has worked for Time Inc. as a staff writer and reporter. He was a combat correspondent during World War II, later serving as chief of the TIME-LIFE bureaus in Mexico City and Buenos Aires. A frequent visitor to Mexico, he has known almost all of the country's eminent men. Johnson is the author of numerous books and articles on Mexico, South America and the American Southwest. Among his books are *Captain Cortés Conquers Mexico*, a children's history of the conquistadors; *Kelly Blue*, a biography of the Texas painter Harold Osman Kelly; *The Andean Republics* in the LIFE World Library; and *Heroic Mexico*, which won the Commonwealth Club gold medal. He is professor of journalism at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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Introduction

The tides of history run with unsuspected power and depth. Henry Adams observed that there is a rate of acceleration in the universe. Only in recent years have we realized that this acceleration particularly grips the countries of Latin America—which we wishfully assumed were at slack tide, although we realized that Europe, Asia and Africa were at the flood.

It is always easier to be informed about the familiar nations of Europe or dead empires whose history stands still for our leisured inspection than to work to understand the present. But political and social forces can burst through to significance as dramatically as the volcano of Parícutin erupted through a peaceful farm in Michoacán, Mexico, in 1943, to grow in a few years into a mountain.

Mexico is a future power forming under our eyes. By the year 2000 it is expected to have a population of more than 75 million. *If* both Mexico and the U.S. choose, Mexico can be a most valuable bridge between the northern and southern families of the Western Hemisphere.

In this book the Editors of LIFE do the United States a service by placing in perspective the past, present and future of Mexico for the hitherto casually informed U.S. reader.

As this book points out, geography and history have created difficulties beyond belief for Mexico. Many languages and many people still blend in the volcano of the country's pride and nationalism. One hundred and fifty years after the break with Spain, Mexico continues the struggle to complete its Revolution and to integrate all its people through a common nationalism and a common way of life.

Mr. Johnson's text makes clear—and it is one of the facts of life which the U.S. must understand—that Mexico is working to these ends through a form of government different from our own, despite the fact that both nations refer to themselves as "democracies." The chapter on Mexico's one-party system spells out why our next door neighbor's "democracy" is not our kind of democracy.

Every Latin American nation is going to work out its destiny in its own way. If we are to be intelligent as the leader of the Western world, it behooves us to know where these nations are headed on their own, rather than try to force them into a mold we would like. We must not lose our heads or hearts if they have ideas of their own.

More than two million American tourists annually go to Mexico to buy its beautiful handicraft, to wonder at its dramatic scenery, to be charmed by its cultivated and dignified people. But not enough U.S. citizens perceive what U.S. policy makers have to understand about the primal political and social energies that have made and are continually remaking modern Mexico. This book will, I hope, help U.S. citizens to comprehend the Mexico with which the U.S. of this generation must live.

For nearly four years I traveled into every state and province of Mexico with a wife and two children, savoring its life on every level. We felt the heartbeat of this endearing people—from humble but dignified *campesinos* to distinguished political leaders and proud, brilliant intellectuals. They have been our friends; we shall always be theirs. Viva Mexico!

ROBERT C. HILL
former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico



Sunday picnickers in Mexico City cluster among the maguey plants of Chapultepec Park. A 1,300-acre sanctuary for eight and a half

The Kaleidoscopic Air

1



million people, the park is a natural woodland spruced up with shaded walks and bridle paths. It was once a favorite dueling ground.

THE oldest city on the continent of North America, splendid and squalid, sprawls broadly on a high, volcano-girt plateau where the air is thin and clear, the wind capricious, the sunlight blinding, the shadows deep and chilling. The wind spins dust devils across the dry bed of the lake that once surrounded what is now Mexico City. It twists plumes of smoke above the mountainside *milpas* where Indians grow maize in the old ways, burning the fields and breaking the ground with a pointed stick. It piles cumulus clouds majestically over the

Sierra of Ajusco and the Desert of the Lions.

The brilliant light sparkles over the ice-clad peaks of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. It flashes on multicolored mosaic walls and on the cold steel and glass façades of skyscrapers. It washes softly over the gray and red lava sides of colonial buildings, over the tumbled blocks of ancient pyramids. It sharpens the details of old stone carvings, those of suffering Christian saints and monstrous pre-Christian gods alike. It touches with fire the roses and gladioli that bloom in abundance in public gardens and the

The Kaleidoscopic Air

bugambilia that clings everywhere—to the high stone walls that conceal mansions of magnificence and to the humble adobe walls of miserable tenements where humans live in antlike colonies. It washes over the nearly nude body of a movie star, stretched languorously beside a pool of blue water in a garden of bright flowers and lush greenery, and it casts deep shadows in the lined face of an aged Indian woman who sells wax matches and cigarettes from a tray near the equestrian statue of King Charles IV of Spain—a statue which, Mexican attitudes toward royalty being what they are, is known simply as *El Caballito*, the little horse.

ALONG avenues that once were causeways connecting the old Aztec island capital of Tenochtitlán with the mainland, the traffic boils and surges. Buses careen through the streets, with passengers clinging to roof, bumper and doorstep. Decrepit trucks, monstrously overloaded, grind their way through the maze. Taxis painted in heathenish splendor race each other, the drivers shouting obscenities or exchanging hand signals and whistles of unmistakable meaning. Shining, new, Mexican-made cars choke the streets (and beneath the streets extends a handsome, efficient subway system). A delivery boy teeters by on a bicycle, a great basket of bakery goods balanced on his head. A *cargador*, or porter, with a stack of handmade chairs piled high on his back shuffles along in the stream of traffic, steadily maintaining the “coyote step” that keeps him from falling forward on his face under the weight. An Indian drags a squealing pig at the end of a frayed rope; another drives a flock of undersized turkeys along the gutter, inches away from death under car wheels. Small newsboys wave their papers like flags, shouting of crimes of passion, disasters on the road, scandals in the republic and the latest results of *box* and *beisbol*.

Braked tires scream. Accelerated motors roar through broken mufflers. Ambulance sirens mingle with the offkey music of curbside barrel organs. Full-throated jukeboxes blare songs of outraged love from saloons. Soap operas,

singing commercials and traditional ballads shriek from a hundred radio and television sets, each with the volume turned on full. From the sidewalks come the cries of shoeshine boys and lottery-ticket sellers—“Five hundred thousand for today, chief; I have your lucky number.” Office girls, immaculately dressed, every hair in place, their eyes carefully shadowed, walk along, arm in arm, their voices like the chirping of birds.

The sounds are strident and arrhythmic except for the soft, steady slap-slap of women shaping maize dough into *tortillas*, most universal and ancient of Mexican foods; and the aroma of stone-ground meal is never far away. Nor, for that matter, is the smell of flowers—carnations, gardenias, dahlias, roses, geraniums, daisies, marigolds—carried through the streets in baskets or bundles on the backs of Indian women; of dust, strong tobacco and faulty drains; of French perfumes and bouquets of herbs, drying in the hot sunlight; of charcoal fires, of good Mexican coffee and of the mysterious mixtures, always strong with chili, simmering in clay pots over tiny braziers, tended by country women sitting placidly on the sidewalk, their skirts outspread, their black hair braided with bright yarn.

THE air of Mexico City is nervous, vital, hectic, dynamic, eclectic and kaleidoscopic. The stranger can find almost anything he seeks, except that he will look in vain for his preconceived notion of a Mexican—the little man seated under a tree, hat over eyes, face on knees, taking a siesta. He cannot be found, although the observant stranger may see a *cargador* who has carried a hundred-pound load on his back over 40 miles of mountain roads, lying on the grass and gasping, trying to fill his aching lungs with the thin air of the high plateau. The charming air of *mañana* or tomorrow, of procrastination, which the guidebooks say pervades life “south of the border,” also is missing. But tomorrow’s air is there, all right. So is the air of the day after tomorrow, of yesterday and the day before yesterday, but

above all it is the air of today, this very minute, and hurry up about it.

Colonial buildings, graciously ornate, their hand-carved stone façades like ancient filigree, blaze with light and whirl with the sound of electronic computing machines. At the National University, oldest educational institution on the North American continent, 75,000 students rush from class to class in buildings that are breathtakingly modern, their walls gleaming with mosaic murals by Mexico's great artists—murals telling the story of the nation's dark legends, its agonizing conflicts and its hopeful future. From any one of the buildings students can look across the lava-bed area known as the Pedregal toward the pyramid of Cuicuilco, which antedates the era of the Aztecs as much as the era of the Aztecs antedates their own. Beneath the crude outlines of that pyramid lie the ruins of another, and below that the ruins of still another, wrapped in mystery.

In the middle of the city stands the great Centro Médico, a staggering complex of research centers, laboratories, hospitals where wage-earning Mexicans can come for free medical or surgical care, and vast auditoriums where the world's learned men of medicine can meet and discuss the advancement of medical science. And a few blocks away one can still visit a *curandera* who diagnoses illness by rubbing the patient's body with an egg, then breaking the egg in a pottery dish and studying the form assumed by the broken yolk. She may prescribe nasturtium leaves plastered on the temples to reduce fever, or rosemary for skin eruptions, or an amulet to guarantee love.

Mansions of the new rich, with high walls enclosing a world of high-fidelity music, electric blenders, swimming pools and U.S.-made plumbing, are sometimes built on what may have been burial grounds or kitchen middens for one of the old cultures. Digging turns up a supply of idols and primitive cooking utensils, shaped from clay or carved from stone. Just beyond the wall a *paracaidista*—"parachutist" or squatter family—may be living in a hut, preparing its food with newer but otherwise identical utensils fashioned of clay or stone, while the children play with small clay dolls that are not unlike the little idols.

Take a seat anywhere in Mexico City; if you sit there long enough you will see some of Mexico's multiple faces, hear some of its many tongues. Sit in the Zócalo, heart of the Mexican world as it was of the Aztec world, the plaza where the great decisive battle was fought between the ruthlessly ambitious men of the Old World and the fierce, demon-ridden men of the New. Or in the strikingly lovely Paseo de la Reforma, much of it planned by the European dreamer

Maximilian, but named for the upheaval that put him before a firing squad. Or near one of the great modern markets where you can buy glowing fruit from the tropics, glistening shrimp from Campeche, fat oysters from Guaymas, rayon ribbons, plastic tableware or charms against the evil eye and wind stones to protect you from sinister airs. Or in the thieves' market at Lagunilla, where you will be offered gore-speckled figures of tortured saints, looted from old churches. Or in the Plaza of Santo Domingo, where the Inquisition

MEXICAN SPANISH

Spanish, the language of Mexico's conquerors, blended with Nahuatl, the tongue of the Aztecs, to produce Mexican Spanish, the *lengua nacional*, which is spoken with an unmistakable Mexican lilt. Nahuatl words are commonly used for foods, beverages, household implements, birds and animals. Some, by way of Spanish, have found their way into common use in English and other tongues. Examples:

NAHUATL	ENGLISH
Ahuacatl	Avocado
Cacahuatl	Cacao, cocoa
Chocolatl	Chocolate
Coyotl	Coyote
Chictli	Chicle
Chilli	Chili
Mizquiltl	Mesquite
Ocelotl	Ocelot
Peyotl	Peyote
Tamalli	Tamale
Tequilan	Tequila
Tomatl	Tomato

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held its cruel deliberations and where today *evangelistas*, letter writers with obsolete typewriters, perform for a few pennies a service of love: if you describe the situation they will write for you an appealing love letter, couched in the most courtly Spanish. Or in Chapultepec Park under the ahuehuete trees that were tall even in the days of Netzahualcóyotl, the 15th Century poet king ("... the obscurity of the night but serves to reveal the brilliance of the stars. . ."). Or in the Alameda, among the flowers and near the monument to the great 19th Century reformer Benito Juárez ("Peace is respect for the rights of others").

You will see women in New York and Paris fashions and women in huipils, the standard outer garment of Mexican Indian women for a thousand years; the elaborately embroidered costumes from Tehuantepec; the rusty black of Spanish widowhood; and everywhere the *rebozo*, the all-purpose shawl which serves as head covering, shoulder wrap, market basket and cradle. To the anthropologist the method of draping the *rebozo* is a sure indication of regional origin, as is the color of the yarn or ribbon woven into the women's shiny black braids. There will be men in tight trousers and short jackets, heavily brocaded in the *charro* tradition; men in white pajamalike cotton suits from the warmer states of Morelos and Guerrero; men in low-crowned, beribboned hats from Michoacán and men in high-crowned hats from Veracruz, voluble and good-natured; Chamula Indians, barelegged; grim-faced Yaquis in the gray-green uniform of the Mexican army; men in severe black suits and sunglasses; and the capital's poverty-stricken *pelados*, or peeled ones, lowest of the low in the economic order, in their precariously worn rags.

THEY will be speaking as great a variety of languages as can be heard in any of the world's capitals: the slurring slang of Mexico City itself, full of double meanings and thinly veiled abuse; lisping Castilian; precise English; *pocho* Spanish from the northern border country, an execrable mixture of bad Spanish and

bad English; the Spanish of Mexican poets, pure, sonorous and full of glittering images; or Nahuatl, most prevalent of Mexico's 50-odd surviving Indian languages and dialects, sounding vaguely Oriental; or Otomí, Huastec, Totonaco, Huichol, Tzotzil or Tarahumara. Two Indians from the state of Oaxaca may try to converse; but one is Mixtec and his words for man, woman, father and mother are, respectively, *yee*, *nahadzehe*, *dzutu* and *dzehe*, while the other uses Zapotec words for the same, *beni*, *benigonnaa*, *bixoce* and *xiñaagaxana*. There are almost one million Indians in Mexico who speak no Spanish whatsoever and who sometimes cannot cope even with the Indian language spoken in a nearby village. "To understand Mexico," runs a wry saying, "you must understand Indians, for we are an Indian country. And who understands Indians?"

At the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Mexico City—a handsome park containing the ruins of an Aztec ceremonial center, a well-restored colonial church, and Mexico's new and very modern Ministry of Foreign Relations—a monument marks the site of one of the final battles between the Aztecs and the Spaniards with this inscription: "It was neither triumph nor defeat—it was instead the painful birth of the mestizo people who are Mexico today."

MEXICO is a mestizo nation, a people of mixed blood (in colonial days the government recognized four classes—Spaniards, Creoles, Indians and Negroes—plus 16 specified mixed-blood types). A Mexican is many more things, both racially and temperamentally.

He may be a person of formidable intelligence and knowledge, multilingual, his culture rich and highly glossed. Or he may be one of the 20 per cent or so of Mexicans who can neither read nor write.

He may be devoutly Catholic, or he may be bitterly anticlerical, full to bursting with complaints about the iniquities which Mexico officially lays at the door of the Church. Or he may be, as many Mexicans are, both Catholic and anticlerical.

He may boast of unadulterated Spanish lineage, speaking scornfully of his fellow countrymen as "these Indians," or he may assure you—with equal pride and as little accuracy—that he is pure Indian himself. Or, having acquired a business suit and factory-made shoes, he may confide: "I used to be an Indian."

He may be wealthy to a degree that is rare in the 20th Century; he may have a palace in the Lomas of Chapultepec, a ranch in Puebla, a weekend house in Cuernavaca, a beach cottage in Acapulco, an apartment in Beverly Hills, a suite at the Waldorf, a fleet of Cadillacs, an army of servants. Or he may suffer from the kind of hopeless, aching poverty that in Mexico is never more than an arm's length away.

HE may desire wealth and work for it with single-minded dedication and ruthlessness, or he may be wholly indifferent to it, indifferent in the way that both his Indian ancestors and the early Christians were.

He may have the remarkable instincts for color and form that place Mexicans among the world's great natural artists, or he may be guilty of the inordinate bad taste that a hybrid civilization is so likely to produce.

He may be open, extroverted, extravagantly convivial; he is more often merely polite and well-mannered, while remaining as closed and inscrutable underneath as an Aztec idol.

He may discuss a business deal with hard-headed acumen and with great and knowing attention to detail—and at the last minute suggest a postponement in the signing of the contract, not because there is anything wrong, but "because the wind is too strong today."

He may fancy himself a friend of foreigners and may adopt foreign manners of speaking and dress; but he will just as often say with some bitterness that Mexico has had nothing but trouble at the hands of foreigners—Spanish, French, English and Yankee.

He may delight in telling stories of his own government's ineptitude, spinning out tales of corruption, political irregularity and scandal; but he may just as often bristle with anger if

the same subjects are broached in the presence of foreigners.

He may take sides in the cold war. Or he may say as a Yucatecan, coming from the most isolated part of Mexico, is supposed to have said: "Let them drop the big bomb and destroy the world; I can always go back to Mérida."

Mexicans joke about the different kinds of Mexicans.

Regiomontanos from the state of Nuevo León and the bustling industrial city of Monterrey, they will say, are generally humorless and uniformly stingy. *Veracruzanos* from the tropical Gulf Coast are great lovers of food, drink, music and dancing and, with the best intentions, are the most foul-mouthed of all Mexicans. *Poblanos*, the people from Puebla, are supposed to be mean and treacherous; an old jingle runs "monkey, parrot or *Poblano*—do not touch them with your *mano* [hand]." Yucatecans are considered naïve, but naïve in an ingratiating way, the butt of a thousand jokes. Jalisco, the source of the best *mariachi* music, is supposed to produce the most *macho*, or masculine, of Mexican men, rugged fellows, adept at riding wild horses, roping cattle, singing serenades and defending their honor. A man from Jalisco, in typical fashion, says, "In my country we are strong and rough, we are all pure *macho*." A Yucatecan answers, "Well, *señor*, in Yucatán half of us are *macho* and the other half are women and we are very content that way."

IN a more serious vein, Mexicans are greatly preoccupied with, and generally puzzled by, the Mexican character—how it functions and why Mexicans behave the way they do. It is a favorite conversational topic not only among observers of the country, but among Mexicans themselves. "The Mexican," writes essayist Ramón Xirau, "questions the sense of his own being, of his own nature. Who else wonders about the meaning of his own existence?"

There are certain areas of agreement and uniformity. The Mexicans are a strong family people. The family is a closed unit against the world. Women, for the most part, lead lives

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that are carefully cloistered and protected. Men enjoy more freedom. The *casa chica*, or little house—the separate extramarital establishment for the husband's pleasure—is common at all levels of society, but it does not impair the sanctity of the home. Children are reared in a tight cocoon of discipline and affection, with usually agreeable results. Essayist Charles Flandrau, observing the pleasant manners and uncomplaining obedience of Mexican children, suggested that all the world's children should be required to be Mexican until the age of 15.

There is a fascination with the macabre, with the circumstances and trappings of death. This may be a logical development from the executions of the Spanish Inquisition (which functioned in Mexico until the early 19th Century) and from the human sacrifices of Indian Mexico. One of the nation's most popular holidays is the Day of the Dead, when deceased forebears are honored ceremoniously and children are given candy skulls to eat.

There is a love of fiesta, of religious festivals or patriotic celebrations, of market days and family anniversaries.

There is a highly developed sense of humor, wry, cynical, satirical and unsparing. Although the Mexican takes himself as seriously as do his Spanish cousins and his Latin American brothers, he is more ready than the others to make a joke about it.

AND there is an almost universal stoicism that is part Spanish but more Indian. Writes Octavio Paz, Mexican poet, essayist and diplomat: "Stoicism is the highest Mexican virtue—military or political. Our history is replete with speeches and episodes which demonstrate the indifference of our heroes to pain and danger. From childhood on we are taught to accept defeat with dignity . . . and if we can't all be stoics . . . at least we can try to be patient, resigned, long-suffering. . . . Much more than to victory we thrill to fortitude in the face of adversity." Paz and others have pointed out that most of Mexico's great heroes were, in the end, failures: Cuauhtémoc, Hidalgo, Morelos,

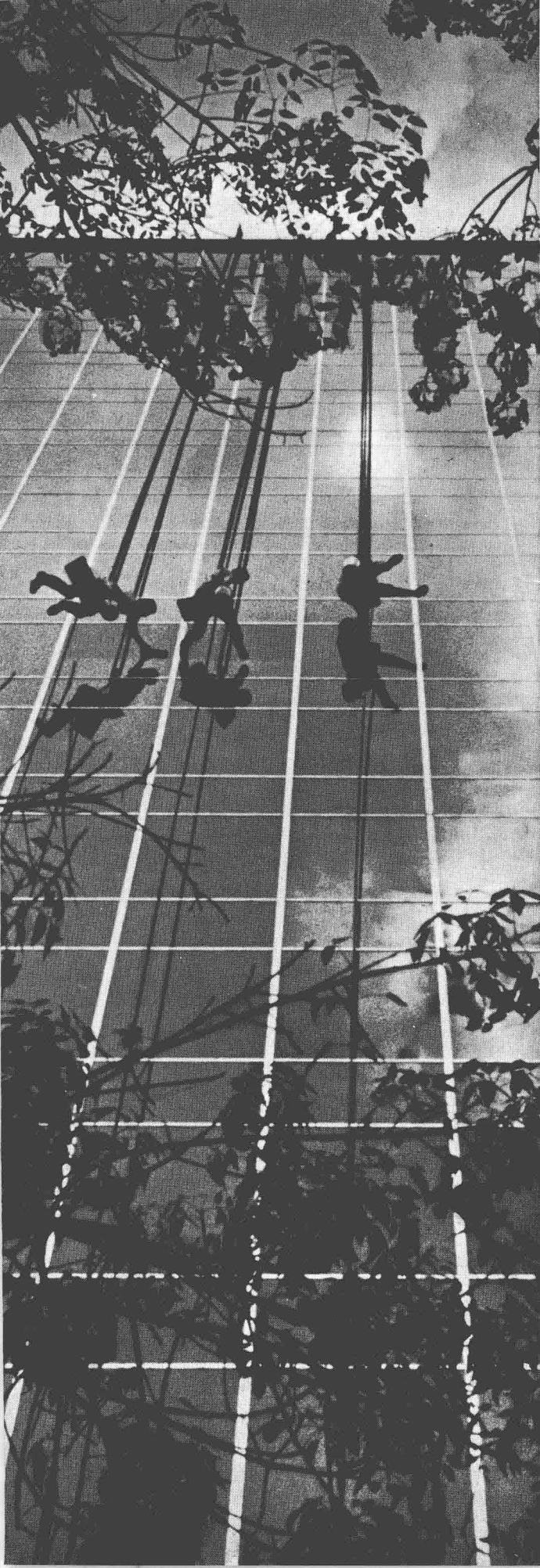
Madero, Zapata. All are loved as much for their disastrous ends as for their principles.

One of the early lessons in history taught to all Mexican children is the story of the *Niños Héroes*, the six boy heroes of the 1846-1848 war with the United States. The six—Juan de la Barrera, Francisco Márquez, Fernando Montes de Oca, Agustín Melgar, Vicente Suárez and Juan Escutia—were cadets of the Military College who made a suicidal last stand on the heights of Chapultepec against the invading Yankee army, shouting with their dying breath, "*Viva México! Viva el Colegio Militar!*" Mexican history is full of heroism and courage and of greater accomplishment on the field of battle, but no other event reflects quite so accurately the Mexican taste in heroics. The monument to the six young heroes is a national shrine.

YET all Mexicans today are involved in and committed to the very antithesis of hopelessness and stoicism: the Mexican Revolution. This does not refer just to the armed conflict that broke out in 1910 and continued for a decade of desolation and confusion, but more generally to the sociopolitical upheaval that began at that time and now, half a century later, is continuing on a wider and wider social front.

The Mexican Revolution contains traces of old-style socialism, of Marxism and of capitalism, with a strong admixture of Indian customs that prevailed long before the white man knew there was an American continent. In its complex whole it is aimed at solving problems, some of which are peculiarly Mexican but many of which are common in areas of the world that have suffered from backwardness, repression, exploitation and perennial turmoil. It has not, Mexicans readily admit, answered all of Mexico's shortcomings in education, communications, social and political homogeneity and material well-being. But progress is being made and can best be measured against Mexico's tortured past. It is an ingenious and curiously Mexican invention.

"*Como México no hay dos*," Mexicans like to say—there is no other country like it.



DANGLING TRIO cleans the glass face of a Mexico City skyscraper. Mexico strongly favors ultramodern architecture which dramatically emphasizes glass and concrete.

A Harmony Amid Diversity

No chords are muted in Mexico and no edges are blurred. Everything proclaims itself boldly, whether in the etched shapes of the landscapes, the clean upthrust of modern buildings or in the stark qualities of the people. A millionaire in Mexico does not hide his opulence, nor a poor man his rags: each demands to be seen as he is. In Mexico, even death is not glossed over; on the holiday known as the Day of the Dead it is greeted with festivities. But the total effect is not one of conflict, for the country's sharp and insistent qualities do not clash with one another. Among the flamboyant elements of Mexico, a balanced harmony prevails.



FASHIONABLE WEDDING revives traditional *charro* style, the groom dressed in the elaborate clothes of a 19th Century Mexican rancher and the *charras*, or extra bridesmaids, in old-fashioned dresses and big hats.



TIMELESS COMEDIAN Mario Moreno, better known as Cantinflas, stands before his portrait in his lavish home. He has been an idol to Mexicans for over 30 years for his role of the street bum shown in the painting.

PURPLE DUSK in Mexico City (*opposite*) is spangled with lights which stretch to the distant mountains. In the foreground is the Alameda, a beautiful small park with fine walks, fountains and centuries-old trees.