

TEXAS PAPERS ON LATIN AMERICA

**Pre-publication working papers of the
Institute of Latin American Studies
University of Texas at Austin**

ISSN 0892-3507

**The Mexican Oil Expropriation
and the Ensuing Propaganda War**

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Paper No. 88-04

THE MEXICAN OIL EXPROPRIATION AND THE ENSUING PROPAGANDA WAR By Robert Huesca

The Mexican nationalization of foreign oil holdings in 1938 unleashed a torrent of English-language propaganda in a battle for the support of American officials and public opinion. The Standard Oil Company of New Jersey led the fight in the corner of the foreign operators with the publication of a series of news bulletins, pamphlets, and books often touted as "a factual summary of the events" (Standard Oil 1938b: 1). The Mexican government countered by publishing a variety of periodicals and economic documents and by dispatching teams of officials, labor leaders, and academics to address U.S. audiences in public forums.

Observers of the period from both the United States and Mexico noted the fever pitch of the propaganda and the media coverage that the expropriation generated. Mexican representatives consistently decried the disinformation campaign waged by Standard Oil through the U.S. press and called on their government to act to reverse the damaging effects (Beteta 1940e; Calderón 1938; Castillo Nájera, AGN 1938b; Hay 1938; Noriega 1938; Suárez 1940). Ambassador Josephus Daniels noted in his memoirs that the oil companies "started to build propaganda fires under the [U.S.] government to compel a return of the properties" (Daniels 1947: 231), and a freelance writer criticized the "intense campaign which the oil companies carried out in the Mexican and foreign press and which for sheer distortion of facts has probably never been equalled" (Millan 1939: 200). Yet the *New York Times*, conveying oil company assertions, argued that the Mexican government was not only propagating false information, but was also using that material to mislead even its own people ("People of Mexico" 1938).

A survey of materials published by both sides in the oil debate reveals not so much disinformation, as attempts to focus readers' attention on specific factors of the expropriation by repeating certain images and omitting others. Furthermore, a limited review of archival material sheds some light on Mexico's perception of the seriousness of the oil company propaganda and exposes some of the motivations and actors on the part of the government. Finally, an examination of U.S. newspapers provides a method of assessing the ability of the Mexican government and the oil companies to influence American editors. A study of propaganda effects on the U.S. press is important for any analysis of the impact on American public policy, since entry into these publications would have reached a wider audience and might have guided public opinion either for or against Mexico.

