The Mexican Agricultural Plan: The Origins of the Green Revolution - A Method of “Containment” During the Cold War?

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This lesson is intended to be a tenth grade global history lesson. It can be used to begin the discussion of policies aimed towards Latin America during the Cold War. It may also be used as a means to discuss the Green Revolution.

**Essential Questions:**

Evaluate the extent to which the Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) was a successful campaign.

How did the Mexican Agricultural Plan (MAP) act as a deterrent to the spread of communism?

Do motives of the Mexican Agricultural Plan (MAP) matter if both parties benefited in the long run?

**Student Objectives**

- Students will use the documents to evaluate why Rockefeller philanthropy (through the Rockefeller Foundation) became involved in the agriculture of Mexico.
- Students will use documents to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.
- Students will create a connection between the policy of containment through the Mexican Agricultural Program and the Green Revolution.
- Students will create an opinion, based upon historical information, on the positive and negative effects of the Green Revolution.

**Background Information**

In 1941, the Rockefeller Foundation sent a commission to survey and evaluate the agricultural conditions of Mexico. At this time, populations were increasing at a faster rate than food production could keep up with. Simultaneously, America was in the midst of defending capitalism as a system. In his report to Chester Barnard, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, Warren Weaver wrote that “The Western Democracies are handicapped because Asiatic and other underprivileged people attribute their present plight to the domination of the capitalist colonial system, and resent the political and racial discrimination under which they lived… in this struggle for the minds of men the side that best helps satisfy man’s primary needs for food, clothing and shelter is likely to win.” Warren Weaver was suggesting that the Rockefeller Foundation needed to find a way to help Mexicans feed themselves in order to prevent communism from spreading to the territory.

Similarly, the Mexican government, since the revolution of the early 20th century, had been employing a land reform program known as the “ejido” system. This plan allowed non-landowners who were primarily working as tenant farmers to
request land from the government to be farmed communally. “Ejidos” were created as a means to allow for the land to be more evenly distributed. It was also a backlash against all lasting remnants of the Spanish colonial system. The ejidos were a mixed bag in terms of their effectiveness. Some were quite successful and created a strong sense of community while others, rife with corruption or lacking financial resources, were highly unsuccessful. Either way, the Mexican nation was struggling to grow enough food for their expanding population.

The Rockefeller Foundation recognized, perhaps through the urging of V.P. and founder of The Pioneer Hybrid Seed Company, Henry Wallace, that the science of agriculture used in the United States could be transferred and applied to developing nations. The resulting Mexican Agricultural Program marked the beginning of the world-wide “Green Revolution.”

In developing an analysis of this topic, students can see the intricately connected themes of “containment” (prior to it actually becoming an official government policy) along with the philanthropic ideals to help starving people of other nations. As an extension to social studies, students can look more deeply into the science involved in genetically modifying seeds to create more resilient strands and finally, students can evaluate the positives and negatives of what became known as the Green Revolution. Now that nations who were previously importing many crops are able to be self sufficient, what are the consequences? Who benefits from these opportunities? Do the positive outcomes outweigh the negatives?

Lesson Plan

Day 1

Procedure:

I. Do Now/ Introduction : Make connections to –“Peace, Land, Bread” (Russian Rev.) “Let them eat cake” (French Rev.); What happens when people don’t have the basic necessities of life, such as food?

II. Students write a brief reflection of the issues involved, then discuss possible outcomes if these issues are left unresolved. Remind/discuss what

III. Following class discussion, introduce the problems of developing nations in the 20th century and their need to feed their growing populations. Also, consider possible reasons individuals, organizations, or nations might have to assist developing countries.

IV. Students will examine Documents #1-4 (photographs, reading, oral history) to begin to identify the problems facing Mexico (see accompanying handouts)

Wrap up discussion: Thus far, what problems have been identified? What solutions did the Rockefeller Foundation propose?
Homework: Read the Oral History record from Jesse Perry (see handout). He tells a story about a baseball team’s request for uniforms. How does he respond to their request? What does this show about how the Rockefeller Foundation helps others? Why do you think he responded the way he did?

Day 2:
I. Do Now/Introduction: Students will respond to this question
   Why would the Rockefeller Foundation create the Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP)? (Note to teacher: try to elicit a response that will help to connect altruistic motives along with possible political motives.)

II. As a class, review the prior day’s findings. We will then dig deeper to evaluate the political motives of the Rockefeller Foundation (consider the policy of containment.)

III. Students will do a close text reading of The World Food Problem, Agriculture and The Rockefeller Foundation by the Advisory Committee for Agricultural Activities.

IV. After reading the text independently, re-read it as a whole class and fill in the graphic organizer (see attachment)

V. Students will write a short preliminary position statement on the political motive they found.

VI. Students will then examine an oral history by Warren Weaver and two graphs (see handouts), then revise or confirm their preliminary position statements.

VII. As a class, reflect on whether the positives outweigh the negatives. Students will evaluate whether it matters what the motives were in creating the program if the program ultimately benefitted both parties. Students will write a research-based reflection using the documents (DBQ) as a final assessment.

VIII. Students will present their final reflections to the class.

Day 3/ Extension: To consider the connections between Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) and the broader Green Revolution.

Building on their experience understanding the Mexican Agricultural Program, students might consider broader questions about the Green Revolution. Teachers are encouraged to use the following sources (and others) to continue this dialogue.

1. An interview with Norman Borlaug (Nobel Peace Prize Winner for his work in the Green Revolution):

2. “Green Revolution: Curse or Blessing,” a pamphlet published by the International Food Policy Research Institute


Other Extension activities might include a debate the Green Revolution, creation of interpretive pamphlets regarding the Green Revolution, or creation of political cartoons relating to a specific aspect of the Green Revolution.
Caption: Some of the fodder goes to market in carts or wagons but most of it is transported by burros, so obscured by their loads that the impression is of a walking corn shock.

Oaxaca, Ou.
Caption: These ejidotarios have just received a grant of land from the Governor of Tamaulipas. The ejido system is still on trial. It appears to operate successfully in some areas, but there have been numerous abuses and many failures. (Ejido Vicente Guerrero, Tamps.)
The Mexican Revolution inspired the idea for the *ejidos*. One of the main objectives of the revolution, reflected in the revolutionary 1917 Mexican Constitution, was to break up large tracts of privately owned land, “*latifundidios,*” into smaller holdings and return the land to the peasants. The *ejidos* were agricultural land grants. The new Mexican government issued grants to use federally owned property to farming and ranching cooperatives, whose membership was largely peasant. Members of the *ejidos* were entitled to use and work the land to their benefit but they did not own the property. The government issued the peasants a limited title to the land; the peasant could not sell the land or use it for collateral. The peasant had to continue to work the land or the title would be revoked. The idea was to help the peasant farmers at that time get a start in life, and at the same time, bring about an equitable distribution and use of property.

“I think I may have mentioned before that we had quite a number of inquiries in the office for improved hybrid seed corn. The standard answer we tried to provide was that these varieties were available through the Corn Commission. We were almost always told that they preferred, somehow, to get the seed from The Rockefeller Foundation - that they didn’t quite trust the Corn Commission varieties. On various occasions, we had an opportunity to visit private farmers. I remember visiting one farm up in Queretaro which was run by a family of ten or eleven brothers and sisters each having his full quota of irrigated land under the land reform laws of Mexico. And this place was indeed a showplace. It was a dairy farm. It had some of the best alfalfa and some of the finest looking dairy cattle that I’ve seen anywhere. It also had a substantial amount of land devoted to the production of hybrid corn, and of course, they were using the Foundation-developed varieties. To visit a farm like that in a community where the surrounding farms are ejidos or were at that time - was quite revealing in that the ejidos not necessarily because of their own lack of energy but because of their almost total lack of any credit or any improved information about how to handle their land, and the fact, too, that their parcels of land are so small that they couldn’t use machinery and modern methods - the contrast between the private farmer and the ejido was very great in this particular area. The same thing is true up in the Torreon area where you find the cotton farmers - or did find the cotton farmers in those days - and the corn and wheat growers and so on. It was the private farm, and oftentimes the small landowner, who was doing the best - seemed to be doing the best job. There were exceptions. There were a few ejidos which were well organized, where their leadership was good enough so that they could go in and collectively get credit and get fertilizer and farm machinery. But these were indeed exceptions to the rule.”
Directions: Read the following story from Jesse Perry’s Oral History, recorded by the Rockefeller Foundation. In writing, describe how does he respond to the laborer’s request? What does this show about how the Rockefeller Foundation helps others?

One day while I was at the station - all the group of laborers assembled around the machinery shed - and their foreman, who was the local village leader, Juan, told me they had come to present a petition to me - and of course I asked them what this was. They said what they would like to do was have the station purchase for the little village - mostly for the laborers who worked on the station - baseball uniforms.

I was just amazed by this, but it developed that almost every little village throughout that whole area had their little baseball team. They competed - and every now and then - would get together and have a baseball game. They thought that this was just tremendous. They attach a great deal of importance to this. It wasn't at all like our baseball fields - just a clearing - pretty rough - but they played it, and played it as hard as they could - and just loved it. A mark of status for a team was to have uniforms - complete uniforms with caps and so forth - and of course they didn't have the money to buy these.

I told them - no - the station wouldn’t finance the purchase of these uniforms, but we would do something else. We would give them - or lend them - about 10 hectares of land we had just cleared. If they would finish clearing out the stumps, we'd give them the seeds, we’d give them the fertilizer. They would have to plant the corn and fertilize it, and take care of it. They could have the harvest, if they paid us for the seed and the fertilizer. If they made any money, they could have the money to buy new uniforms. They thought this over right then, and thought this was a fair proposition.

We allocated 10 hectares, a block, and they planted just as they would their own native corn - with a sharp pointed stick. They kept the vegetation cleared down - and we gained by that of course - since it helped clear the land for us. They fertilized it by hand - carried buckets of fertilizer. They harvested - at the end of the rainy season - a very fine crop of corn. It was good soil, but with fertilizer, it just yielded fine.

They were extremely pleased with that - because it looked so good - and secondly, because they made lot of money on it, I mean, relatively speaking - more than enough to buy all their uniforms, baseball bats, masks for the catcher.

As a result of this they brought me something I prize a great deal. This was a signed letter acknowledging the fact that they had gotten these uniforms. It was rather strangely worded, but when they finally put their signatures on it, I found it the most interesting thing because many of them couldn't sign their names _ and they had someone write their names on the piece of paper, and then put their thumb print on top of their name. I have this piece of paper now - as a souvenir of that area - I thought this was pretty interesting.
Handout

Reading: *The World Food Problem, Agriculture and The Rockefeller Foundation* by the Advisory Committee for Agricultural Activities (June 21, 1951)

The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research was founded in 1901; the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission in 1909; and The Rockefeller Foundation - with its great initial emphasis on public health and medical education - in 1913. As one looks back, he sees how logical and natural, indeed how almost inevitable, was this emphasis on the medical sciences.

Whatever our present era will eventually be called, the name must indicate a world wholly changed. What now are the great enemies of the welfare of mankind? Hunger, the incapacity of the hungry, the resulting general want, the pressures of expanding and demanding population, and the reckless instability of people who have nothing to lose and perhaps something to gain by embracing new political ideologies designed not to create individual freedom but to destroy it - these seem to be basic dangers of our present world.

It is the thesis of this memorandum that The Rockefeller Foundation has, at the present time, a great opportunity to serve the welfare of mankind through activities in agriculture; and that this opportunity is, for our present world, as pressing and important as was that opportunity in medicine which was so clearly seen and so effectively seized, some forty years ago....

Agriculture has, of course, been only one of many factors in population growth. Industrialization, which taught men to exploit the fossil fuel resources of the world, was a second. The application of public health measures, which has drastically reduced natural death rates, has proved to be a third. These three factors have combined in our generation to create an unprecedented situation in which a population already outrunning its food resources is still increasing at a fabulous rate. The problem of population and food is no longer one of the future. It is upon us now. The problem of food has become one of the world's most acute and pressing problems; and directly or indirectly, it is the cause of much of the world's present tension and unrest.

There is tragedy and danger in human hunger and the resultant suffering. Hunger is a powerful enemy of peace. There is a growing appreciation of the relation of subsistence to health and to human attitudes; to friendly relations or tensions between peoples; to peace or war.

The establishment by the United Nations of the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the emphasis placed on "food and people" by UNESCO are instances of recognition of the problem and of intent to do something about it. One of the purposes of President Truman's Point IV Program is to improve food production in underdeveloped countries. Unfortunately, however, concepts of needs, methods, and procedures in these relatively young organizations are still somewhat nebulous and limitations of trained personnel are serious, so that there unfortunately is little hope that they can function effectively enough and soon enough to meet the situation. There is still acute and urgent need for immediate and intelligent action. Whether additional millions in Asia and elsewhere will become Communists will
depend partly on whether the Communist world or the free world fulfills its promises. Hungry people are lured by promises, but they may be won by deeds. Communism makes attractive promises to underfed peoples; democracy must not only promise as much, but must deliver more.

The Western democracies are handicapped because Asiatic and other underprivileged people attribute their present plight to the domination of the capitalist colonial system, and resent the political and racial discrimination under which they have lived. These are handicaps which only effective action can overcome. In this struggle for the minds of men the side that best helps satisfy man's primary needs for food, clothing, and shelter is likely to win. Philosophical subtleties and pious platitudes are ineffective substitutes for bread and milk in the minds of hungry and uneducated men. The philosopher Seneca, more than 2,000 years ago, saw clearly that "A hungry people listens not to reason, nor cares for justice, nor is bent by any prayers."

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“I thought you were going to speak of another little episode which has always stuck in my mind as sort of symbolic of what was accomplished in the program and symbolic of the gratitude of the Mexican people. George and I were one day driving out from Mexico City to Chapingo and on the way out we went past a field which was one of the very early experimental fields of potatoes - this was not very early in the program because we didn't start to work with potatoes until the program had been going for some time. As to time of year, it must have been September, October, something like that, maybe September. Perhaps in Mexico, potatoes mature earlier than that, maybe August - anyway, George said, "Let's stop and look at the potatoes." There was a chap hoeing and George asked him in his fluent Spanish to please dig up a hill and let us look at it. He dug up a hill, quite obviously the first hill that he had dug up. They were accustomed at that time to very small potatoes, not as big as a golf ball - a golf ball would have been a good-sized potato in Mexico at that time - they ran from characteristically the size of a marble to the size of a golf ball which, as I say, is rather a big potato and they were quite likely to have many blemishes on the skin, too. He dug up a potato. I won't say that it looked exactly like one of the biggest Idaho potatoes but it was a potato three or four inches long, nice clear light skin, no blemishes on it. He picked this potato up from the soil, brushed it off with his hands, stood there looking at it and before he handed it to us, as he was looking at it, he crossed himself.”
HANDOUT: Successes of the Mexican Agricultural Program

Graphs- Rockefeller Foundation
HANDOUT: Successes of the Mexican Agricultural Program

Graphs - Rockefeller Foundation