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PANCHO VILLA AND THE COLUMBUS RAID:
THE MISSING DOCUMENTS

CHARLES H. HARRIS III AND LOUIS R. SADLER

GENERAL PANCHO VILLA'S attack on the small New Mexico border town of Columbus during the predawn hours of March 9, 1916, holds a particular fascination for historians of the Mexican Revolution. These writers, both Mexican and American, have continued to dispute not only the details of Villa's raid, but, more importantly, its significance. Yet none of the numerous books and articles dealing with the raid has definitively answered the central question: Why did Villa raid Columbus? It is precisely because Villa's motivation for the raid remains unclear that historians have avidly sought additional documentation to lay this point to rest once and for all. The existence, therefore, of a mass of documents found in the saddlebags of a dead Villista officer at Columbus has tantalized scholars for more than half a century. These long-lost documents have now been found in the National Archives.¹ Although the papers do *not* reveal why Villa attacked Columbus, the finding of the documents solves one of the major historiographical mysteries of the Mexican Revolution and provides a sizable body of primary material for a phase of Villa's career which has not been fully studied.

The general outline of Villa's assault on Columbus is too well known to be repeated here. What is less evident are the circumstances surrounding the finding of the Villa papers and their subsequent transmission to officials in the War Department. The documents were discovered shortly after Villa's troops retreated from Columbus and soldiers of the United States 13th Cavalry began policing up the debris of battle. After the saddlebags were un-

covered near the body of a dead Villista officer, they were examined by army officers, who delivered them to a State Department representative. This official, George C. Carothers, who arrived in Columbus within hours of the raid, pronounced them genuine. In a letter to General Hugh Lennox Scott, Carothers wrote: "I was in Columbus the afternoon of the day the attack took place, and examined the papers that were in the two wallets Villa lost on the battlefield during his retreat. The papers fully connect him with the Santa Isabel massacre, and also establish the fact that he decided to declare war on us last December."² And in subsequent testimony Carothers stated: "I also examined two large portfolios of documents that were found, that I recognized as being those of a secretary of Villa, and they contained a great many documents of different kinds . . . which were afterwards forwarded to Washington."³ The two wallets of papers were hand carried from Columbus to Fort Bliss, and then shipped to Southern Department Headquarters at Fort Sam Houston. There the department commander, Major General Frederick Funston, studied the documents before sending them to the adjutant general in Washington.⁴

A *New York Times* correspondent gained access to the documents, and brief excerpts from two of them were published in the March 11, 1916, edition of that newspaper. But historians have heretofore never succeeded in examining the captured Villa papers. As Clarence C. Clendenen noted in his prize winning book, *The United States and Pancho Villa*, "the writer has seen several references to these lost papers but has been unable to locate them."⁵ The authors of the most recent scholarly articles on the Columbus raid, Francis J. Munch⁶ and James A. Sandos, both refer to the missing Villa papers. Sandos states: "Numerous students have attempted to locate these papers but without success. This writer, following Arthur S. Link, Haldeen Braddy, and Clarence Clendenen, also tried to find the elusive manuscripts, but to no avail. These documents did exist, however."⁷ Perhaps the most extreme position taken regarding the Villa papers was that of the folklorist Haldeen Braddy, who, in a monograph on the Columbus raid, referred to a long and careful search made by a local historian

at Columbus who failed to locate the papers. On the basis of this, Braddy concluded that the manuscripts never existed.⁸

They do indeed exist and were located in January 1975 in the National Archives in Washington. For several years we have been engaged in research on one of the most important but most neglected aspects of the Mexican Revolution—how the various factions armed themselves. Since it was armed might, as well as ideology, that shaped the Revolution, a study of the munitions industry within a broad context will provide the basis for a significant reinterpretation of the revolutionary movement itself.

It was while conducting this research that the missing Villa papers were uncovered. Our interest in the Columbus raid centered only on its relation to our larger project. We had, therefore, kept the missing documents in mind in the hope that they might contain material bearing on Villa's acquisition of munitions. While working in the National Archives we talked at length with Timothy Nenninger, a senior archivist in the Old Army and Navy Branch. In response to our inquiry concerning the missing manuscripts, Nenninger suggested that there were several possibilities. His search produced a portfolio from the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, which indeed contained the Villa papers. In short, the principal credit for bringing the long-lost documents to light belongs to Nenninger, to whom we are deeply indebted. In all probability, the documents were overlooked by previous researchers because of the method used for indexing the files. There are record cards for each set of documents, but in the case of the Villa papers several cards are clipped together, and the initial one does not fully indicate the file's contents.

Some of the documents are of little value, such as fifty-two unsigned commissions, mainly for company grade officers, dated on September 14, 1915, at Villa's headquarters in Torreón. The commissions were evidently intended to have been signed by Villa. There are also a few telegrams in which Villa is asked to resolve personal problems among his followers.⁹ Of greater interest is a telegram from the manager of the American Smelting and Refining Company's installation at Chihuahua, protesting to Villa the

state government's decree confiscating the company's property and proposing an arrangement whereby operations could continue.¹⁰

The bulk of the documents deal with Villa's disastrous campaign in Sonora, launched from Chihuahua in October 1915 in a desperate effort to offset the crushing defeats that General Alvaro Obregón had inflicted on him in the spring of that year. Villa planned the Sonora campaign assuming that the United States would remain neutral in the struggle; but on October 19, 1915, Wilson recognized Venustiano Carranza as *de facto* President of Mexico, and the result was catastrophic for Villa. Not only was the border closed to arms shipments for him, but also Washington permitted Carranza to reinforce Sonora with thousands of General Obregón's troops transported on American railroad lines from Eagle Pass, Texas.

That Villa regarded Washington's action as a betrayal is well known, but his antipathy toward the United States extended down to the Mormons, among the most inoffensive Americans then living in Mexico. On October 26, 1915, only a week after the recognition of Carranza, Villa assembled the inhabitants of Colonia Morelos, in northeastern Sonora near the Chihuahua border, and delivered a fiery speech. The general stated his intention of rescuing the settlers from the "tyranny of the North American Mormons, who exploit, vilify, and assassinate the Mexicans in this region." He urged his listeners to "throw off the yoke of the Yankee," offering to arm them; they in turn promised forcibly to prevent any Mormons from settling in the area.¹¹ Villa's taking time at the beginning of a crucial military campaign to whip up anti-Mormon sentiment would indicate that, despite his public pronouncements, his growing hatred of Americans was by no means limited to those in the Wilson administration.

Regarding the conduct of the Sonoran campaign itself, the documents include a series of telegrams to Villa from Carlos E. Randall, whom the former had appointed as interim governor of Sonora.¹² These communications, sent from Nogales while that city still functioned as the Villista capital of the state, are routine, with the exception of one telegram announcing the fall of Naco

and one written largely in cipher, for which there is no clear text.¹³ There is, in addition, a scattering of telegrams to Villa from his field commanders, Generals Fructuoso Méndez,¹⁴ Francisco Beltrán,¹⁵ José María Juradó,¹⁶ Manuel E. Banda,¹⁷ José María Ochoa,¹⁸ and Francisco Urbalejo¹⁹ discussing tactics and strategy. Whereas the documents provide only isolated glimpses of the military side of the Sonoran campaign, a clearer pattern emerges regarding the logistical aspects of that operation. The salient point is that Villa was in dire financial straits. Even as the campaign began, his fiat money had become worthless, evidenced by a rather pathetic telegram from one of his generals stating: "I respectfully inform you that in this region dominated by my forces people absolutely refuse to accept our paper money. Please tell me what to do to make them accept it."²⁰

Villa thus found himself in the awkward position of frequently having to pay for his purchases in dollars, and dollars were scarce at this stage in his declining career. While he held such border towns as Nogales and Naco, he could resupply his army from the United States, but only on a cash basis. For example, among the expenditures at Naco was one for \$6,562.50 for 5,000 sets of underwear purchased from the Haymon Krupp Company in El Paso, and an even greater sum for 5,000 uniforms presumably bought from the same firm.²¹ There also arrived at Naco from El Paso 1,444 sacks of flour and 200 cases of sardines consigned, interestingly enough, to Sam Dreben, a colorful American soldier of fortune whose services had already been employed by several factions in the Mexican Revolution.²² These transactions, though, were only faintly reminiscent of the scale on which Villa was once able to supply his army.

Most of the purchases made at Naco were for insignificant amounts: \$53.90 to S. Felger General Merchandise for sundries; \$395.00 to the Phelps Dodge Mercantile Company for flour, salt, and forage; \$103.50 to one John Towner for hay; and a small amount of medical supplies from the Meadows Drug Store in Douglas.²³ In addition, there are a number of receipts signed by Villa's followers for funds disbursed to them by Lieutenant Colonel

Miguel Trillo, the army's paymaster. The amounts distributed in Naco total \$18,104, plus 12,000 silver pesos.²⁴ Yet most of these funds were distributed in dribbles, the only significant transactions being \$4,000 to General Manuel Medinabeitia, 4,000 pesos to General Miguel Saavedra, and \$10,000 and 8,000 pesos to General José E. Rodríguez, commander of the Naco garrison. But Rodríguez had little opportunity to spend the funds in Naco; he received them on November 7, and on November 15 the town fell to Obregón's army.

Not only was Obregón's advance depriving Villa of his sources of supply along the border—Nogales fell on November 26—but also Villa's sources of funds were dwindling. Most of the money disbursed at Naco had been extorted from the Cananea Consolidated Copper Company, which on November 5 had delivered at Villa's demand \$25,000 as a deposit on export duties.²⁵ Operations along the border having proved unsuccessful, Villa turned southward, driving to the outskirts of Hermosillo before giving up the Sonoran campaign as a fiasco. Among his reasons for abandoning the campaign at the end of November was the fact that his base in Chihuahua was threatened by contingents of Carranza's army advancing northward along the central railroad from Torreón. After a difficult retreat across the Sierra Madre Occidental, during which he had to abandon his artillery, Villa emerged in western Chihuahua, endeavoring to regroup what had once been the formidable Division of the North.

His assembly point was the Hacienda de Bustillos, where on December 23, 1915, he met with his commanders to formulate strategy.²⁶ They adopted a resolution denouncing Carranza for allegedly selling out to the United States as the price for diplomatic recognition and reaffirmed their faith in Villa as the leader who was awakening the nation to the imminent threat from the United States, which country was described as fomenting discord among Mexicans in order to have a pretext for intervention. Villa, as Supreme Chief of Operations of the Conventionist Army, was rallying his followers to counter this menace, and toward that end General Severino Cenicerós was commissioned to proceed to the

state of Durango and raise forces to help defend the national sovereignty.²⁷

Villa continued to expand on this theme. A few days later, having transferred his headquarters to the Hacienda de San Gerónimo, he designated General Eduardo Ocaranza to deliver a personal letter to General Emiliano Zapata, the leading revolutionary chieftain in southern Mexico.²⁸ In this letter Villa made a remarkable proposal. He began by summarizing the strategy behind his Sonoran campaign, explaining that he had planned to occupy that state, then sweep southward along the Pacific coast and drive inland through Jalisco and Michoacán in order to link up with Zapata. The plan, however, had been frustrated because the enemy had enjoyed the blatant support of the United States government, and Carranza had been able to reinforce his Sonoran garrisons. Villa added that only with great difficulty had he restrained his infuriated troops from crossing the border to chastize the Americans. To justify having broken off the campaign when he was at the gates of Hermosillo, Villa stated that he had learned the United States planned to allow Carranza to move troops on American railroads to seize Ciudad Juárez, Villa's vital logistical base in Chihuahua. Yet by the time he managed to return to Chihuahua, Juárez had been lost to the enemy. Villa lamely explained that although he still had enough troops to clear Chihuahua of Carranza's forces, he had instead decided to confer with his generals in order to analyze the situation.

Their analysis was that the United States represented the common foe and that Mexico's independence was about to be lost unless all honorable Mexicans took up arms to prevent the betrayal of the fatherland. Villa stated that he was sure Zapata was aware of the agreements into which Carranza had entered with the United States. Carranza had allegedly agreed to cede Magdalena Bay for ninety-nine years, to grant important concessions regarding railroads and petroleum deposits, and to permit the United States to approve appointment of Mexican ministers of the Treasury, Interior, and Foreign Relations. In return, Carranza would receive a loan of \$500,000,000, guaranteed by the Mexican public

revenues, which would be supervised by American appointees.²⁹

In view of these agreements, Villa thought that Zapata should realize that the betrayal of the fatherland was a fact. Accordingly, Villa and his generals had decided to stop fighting their brother Mexicans and to organize in order to attack the Americans "in their own lairs," and to impress on them that Mexico was a land of free men and a tomb for traitors. Villa explained that in order to inform the public of the situation and to raise as many troops as possible, he had divided his army into guerrilla bands, to be deployed in various parts of the country for six months, at the end of which time the Villista forces would concentrate in the state of Chihuahua to initiate "the movement that will bring about the union of all Mexicans." Since the proposed invasion of the United States could only be launched across the border, "in view of the fact that we have no ships," Villa expressed the hope that Zapata would agree to come to Chihuahua with all his troops. Together they could undertake the task of reconstructing Mexico and chastizing "our eternal enemy which will always be fomenting hatred and provoking difficulties and disputes among our people."

The letter has a distinct air of unreality about it. Even had he been willing to collaborate in Villa's grandiose scheme, it was manifestly impossible for Zapata, who was also in decline militarily, to move his army to Chihuahua across hundreds of miles of territory firmly controlled by Carranza's forces. Blithely ignoring this problem, Villa empowered General Ocaranza not only to deliver the letter to Zapata but also to travel elsewhere in the country to explain the project to other revolutionary chieftains.³⁰ Meanwhile, Villa himself continued to make preparations. On February 10, 1916, he sent letters to several of his generals asking how their recruiting efforts were coming. He added that he intended to meet with them at Camargo and Jiménez in southern Chihuahua a month before the proposed campaign in order to work out the matter of supplying the army, which was to concentrate in Chihuahua.³¹ The campaign itself presumably was scheduled to begin in July 1916.

Unfortunately, the remaining documents reveal nothing further about Villa's plans to attack the United States, for they deal with relatively routine matters.³² An analysis of the documents confirms the view of Braddy, who, modifying his earlier position, speculated that "Too much importance can be assigned to these 'lost' papers, especially the charge that they contained the plan for the Columbus attack."³³ Furthermore, the Villa papers shed little light on the major theses that have been advanced to explain the motivation for the raid. These theses include: Villa's desire not only to retaliate against the Americans but also to provoke their intervention in Mexico, thus creating a situation on which he could capitalize;³⁴ his intention to loot Columbus and the nearby 13th Cavalry encampment for munitions, remounts, and provisions;³⁵ his desire for vengeance against certain Columbus businessmen who had allegedly defrauded him of money and arms;³⁶ and, finally, the provocative theory that German agents manipulated Villa into attacking Columbus in order to embroil the United States in a war with Mexico.³⁷ If the documents tend to support any thesis, it would be that of retaliation against the Americans, as indicated by Villa's speech at Colonia Morelos and his letter to Zapata.

The finding of the Villa manuscripts resolves one of the long-standing questions facing historians of the Mexican Revolution. Whereas the papers provide a sizable body of material for a relatively neglected period of Villa's career, they are also significant for what they do *not* contain, namely, his specific motives for attacking Columbus. Indeed, we may suggest that despite the plethora of works treating the Columbus raid, much remains to be done on this topic. There exist primary sources which no scholar has yet utilized, such as a brief diary taken from the body of a dead Villista,³⁸ and the 184-page transcript of the trial held in Deming, New Mexico, for six captured Villistas.³⁹ The definitive history of the Columbus raid has yet to be written.*

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NOTES

1. The 294 documents are found in the National Archives (NA), Record Group (RG) 94, Adjutant General's Office (AGO), File 2384662 (filed with 2377632). Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent citations to Villa material refer to documents in this file.

2. Carothers to H. L. Scott, Mar. 13, 1916, Scott Papers, Library of Congress, as cited in Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916* (Princeton, 1964), p. 206.

3. U. S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States, *Investigation of Mexican Affairs*, 66th Cong., 2nd sess., Sen. Doc. 285 (Washington, 1920), I, 1781.

4. The letters of transmittal are included with the Villa documents.

5. Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa: A Study in Unconventional Diplomacy* (Ithaca, 1961), p. 244, n. 30.

6. Munch, "Villa's Columbus Raid: Practical Politics or German Design?" *New Mexico Historical Review*, 44 (July 1969), 205, n. 14; 210, n. 60.

7. Sandos, "German Involvement in Northern Mexico, 1915-1916: A New Look at the Columbus Raid," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 50 (Feb. 1970), 74, n. 31.

8. Braddy, "Pancho Villa at Columbus: The Raid of 1916," *Southwestern Studies*, 3 (Spring 1965), 40, n. 40.

9. Colonel Zenaido Torres to Villa, Oct. 20, 1915; María Luisa Velásquez to Villa, Oct. 21, 1915.

10. Carlos F. Galán to Villa, Oct. 21, 1915.

11. Signed copy of the speech and the other proceedings, Oct. 26, 1915. This speech seems to contradict Clendenen's interpretation of Villa's policy toward the Mormon colonists in western Chihuahua. See Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa*, p. 208.

12. Randall to Villa, Nov. 14, 1915; Nov. 15, 1915 (two telegrams); Nov. 16, 1915.

13. Randall to Villa, Nov. 15, 1915 (two telegrams, one marked "Urgent").

14. Méndez to Villa, Oct. 28, 1915 (two telegrams).

15. Beltrán to Villa, Nov. [11?], 1915.

16. Jurado to Villa, Nov. 13, 1915.

17. In a dispatch transmitted by Colonel José María Acosta to Villa at Magdalena, Nov. 15, 1915.

18. Ochoa to Villa, Nov. 14 and 15, 1915.

19. Urbalejo to Villa, Nov. 14, 1915, and three undated and unsigned telegrams. See also Villa to Urbalejo, Nov. 15, 1915.

20. Santos Ortiz to Villa, Oct. 20, 1915.

21. Bill from Haymon Krupp and Co., Nov. 6, 1915; General José E. Rodríguez to Villa, Nov. 7, 1915. There was no lack of merchants in the United States willing to do business with Villa, provided the latter could pay in cash. See, for example, A. Pinegro to Villa, Oct. 2, 1915.

22. Undated bill of lading; receipt signed by Dreben at Naco, Nov. 6, 1915; for sketches of Dreben's career see the *El Paso Herald-Post*, May 30, 1961, and Oct. 10, 1971.

23. Receipts from S. Felger General Merchandise, Nov. 4, 1915; receipts from Phelps Dodge Mercantile Co., Nov. 4 and 5, 1915; receipt from John Towner, Nov. 6, 1915; receipt from Meadows Drug Store, Nov. 3, 1915; see also a telegram from a Dr. Sánchez at Naco to Enrique Acosta at Douglas, Nov. 4, 1915.

24. Sixty-seven receipts signed at Naco, Nov. 2-7, 1915. There are similar kinds of receipts as follows: six signed at Juárez on Oct. 9, totaling \$268; twenty-one signed at Casas Grandes on Oct. 12-18, 1915, totaling \$2,355; seven signed at Colonia Morelos on Oct. 23-28, 1915, totaling \$165; one signed at El Realito on Oct. 31, 1915, totaling \$25; eight signed at "Campamento" on Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1915, totaling \$780; one signed at Cananea on Nov. 7, totaling \$500; four signed at Molina on Nov. 10-11, 1915, totaling \$275; three signed at Santa Cruz on Nov. 12, 1915, totaling \$370; thirty-four signed at Nogales on Nov. 12-14, 1915, totaling \$1,155; and ten signed at Magdalena on Nov. 14-15, 1915, totaling \$127.

25. Receipt issued at Naco on Nov. 5, 1915; the company delivered \$20,200, plus three boxes containing 12,000 silver pesos. It should be mentioned that there was yet another copy of this receipt, with a marginal notation that the money was actually paid to ransom three of the company's employees held by Villa. See *New York Times*, March 11, 1916.

26. List of the twenty-seven generals who conferred with Villa at the Hacienda de Bustillos, Dec. 23, 1915.

27. Undated and unsigned resolution, evidently taken at Bustillos on Dec. 23, 1915. General Pablo Bracamonte, who also attended the Bustillos meeting, was dispatched on a similar mission to Zacatecas. See Carothers to Secretary of State, April 19, 1916, RG 59, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Mexico, 1910-29 (RDS-M), Microcopy (M) 274, Reel 51, 812.00/17922, NA.

28. Villa to Zapata, Jan. 8, 1916. The *New York Times* published portions of this letter on Mar. 11, 1916. See also Carothers to Secretary of State, Mar. 10, 1916, RG 59, RDS-M, M274, Reel 51, 812.00/17401, NA.

29. Villa had made the same charges against Carranza in a letter on Nov. 23, 1915, to General Angel Flores, one of the Carrancistas defending Hermosillo. See Alberto Calzadiaz Barrera, *Hechos Reales de la Revolución*, 3 vols. (Mexico, 1967-1972), III, 141-43. Villa evidently believed the rumors that Carranza had secretly accepted these conditions, despite a public denial by Carranza's special agent in Washington. See *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 1915.

30. Villa to Whom It May Concern, Jan. 8, 1916.

31. [Villa] to General Benjamín Argumedo, Feb. 10, 1916; same to General Ceniceros, Feb. 10, 1916; same to General Canuto Reyes [Feb. 10, 1916?]. Similar letters were apparently sent to Generals Calixto Contreras and Santos Bañuelos.

32. These papers include a letter from Villa at the Hacienda de Bustillos on Dec. 24, 1915, authorizing General Beltrán to take possession of the Hacienda de Sainapuchi; a letter from Colonel Pablo López at the Hacienda de Rubio on Jan. 6, 1916, inviting Beltrán for a conference; a letter from General Julio Acosta at Ciudad Guerrero on Jan. 12, 1916, asking Villa to transfer Colonel López and his troops because of the abuses they were committing in that town; a letter from Villa to Colonel Julián Cárdenas on Feb. 15, 1916, authorizing the latter to assemble the home guards of the Haciendas de Rubio and La Quemada; and a copy of the Order of the Day issued by Villa's headquarters at the Hacienda de San Gerónimo on Feb. 18, 1916.

33. Braddy, *Pershing's Mission in Mexico* (El Paso, 1966), p. 70, n. 8.

34. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram* (New York, 1958), p. 93; Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa*, p. 245; Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises*, p. 207.

35. Braddy, "Pancho Villa at Columbus," p. 36; Munch, "Villa's Columbus Raid," p. 198.

36. Alberto Calzadiaz Berrera, *Por Qué Villa Atacó Columbus (Intriga Internacional)* (Mexico, 1972); Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa*, pp. 245-46.

37. Sandos, "German Involvement in Northern Mexico," passim; Munch, "Villa's Columbus Raid," pp. 200-4. Also see Friedrich Katz, "Alemania y Francisco Villa," *Historia Mexicana*, 12 (July-Sept. 1962), 88-102.

38. Zach L. Cobb to Secretary of State, March 11, 1916, RG 59, RDS-M, M274, Reel 51, 812.00/17427, NA.

39. State of New Mexico vs. Eusevio Rentería et al., Luna District Court Case #664, 1916, State Records Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico.