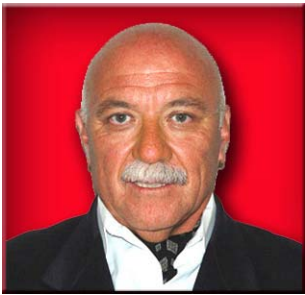


# “El Grito de Dolores and Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla’s quest for Mexican Independence.



By Dr. Juan Valera-Lema

At the beginning of the year 1810, the Spanish influence and control of the Americas had been carried on for over 300 years. The Vice royalty of New Spain, present day Mexico, Central America, a part of the Caribbean and a considerable area of the United States of America, was ruled by the Kings of Spain through their representative, the Viceroy. However in 1808 Spain itself was under the control of France.

In a convoluted political maneuver, Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew King Carlos IV of Spain and set up his son Don Fernando as King Fernando VII. The latter king only reigned for about six weeks before Napoleon forced him to abdicate in favor of Carlos IV, who immediately signed over Spain to France. Napoleon’s brother Joseph Bonaparte was then placed on the throne as King José I.

In America meanwhile, the Spanish control had been challenged from its inception, first by the indigenous people of America, then by black slaves and latter on by the Criollos. The Criollos were a social class in the caste system of the overseas colonies established by Spain in the 16th century, particularly in Latin America, made up of the locally born people Spanish ancestry. The Criollo class ranked below that of the Peninsulares, who were the colonists born in Spain. From its inception the colonial government of New Spain was dominated by the Peninsulares, who held most leadership positions in the church and government, as well as the land and wealth and were in many other ways favored rule by the existing viceroy.

The events of the early 1800s in Europe were followed with great interest in Mexico, particularly in the Guanajuato and Queretaro areas, which were the vice royalty’s leading agricultural and mining centers and where a number of disgruntled Criollos would gather to plan for conspiracy and revolution, hoping to take power away from the Peninsulares. Among the conspirators was Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, the parish priest of Dolores, a small agricultural town east of the city of Guanajuato. Father Hidalgo was a well-educated liberal priest who questioned policies of the church including clerical celibacy, banning certain literature and the infallibility and the control of wealth and power held by the Peninsulares. Hidalgo became the parish priest of Dolores and his church had mainly an Indian congregation whose languages he spoke and to whom he administered practical skills of life as much as religious doctrine. In Queretaro, Hidalgo met Captain Ignacio Allende, a royal army officer and revolutionary thinker, as well as other leaders of the insurgency to plan an uprising in October of 1810. The conspiracy plans were leaked out to Spanish authorities and the arrest of the conspirators was ordered. However, they were alerted by Doña Josefa Reyes the wife of a Royal Magistrate in Guanajuato. Because this act and other activities on behalf of the independence of Mexico, Doña Josefa became as much a symbol of the Mexican emancipation movement, as any of her male colleagues in the struggle for freedom.

Rather than going into hiding, Father Hidalgo decided to hasten his call to arms and proclaim revolution against the Spanish government on the same day that he was alerted of his pending arrest, September 15th of 1810. Hidalgo immediately freed the local prisoners and locked up the Spanish authorities. At dawn on the morning of September 16 1810, the pealing of the bells of the Church of Dolores called the parishioners of the area and soon the tumult of the

crowd filled the church courtyard and adjacent plaza. Overcoming the murmur of the crowd, Hidalgo launched the rebellion with his famous call to arms and revolution. Although the words of the call to arms and insurgency have been lost in time, it was reported by contemporary witnesses that Hidalgo proclaimed: "My friends and countrymen: neither the king nor tributes exist for us any longer. We have borne this shameful tax, which only suits slaves, for three centuries as a sign of tyranny and servitude; a terrible stain which we shall know how to wash away with our efforts. The moment of our freedom has arrived, the hour of our liberty has struck; and if you recognized its great value, you will help me defend it from the ambitious grasp of the tyrants. Only a few hours remain before you see me at the head of the men who take pride in being free. I invite you to fulfill this obligation. And so without a patria or liberty we shall always be at a great distance from true happiness. It has been imperative to take this step as now you know, and to begin this has been necessary. The cause is holy and God will protect it. The arrangements are hastily being made and for that reason I will not have the satisfaction of talking to you any longer. Long live, then, the Virgin of Guadalupe! Long live America for which we are going to fight!" This exhortation is officially known as the "Grito de Dolores" and is considered one of the most important in Mexican history.

Following his speech, Hidalgo and Allende led about 600 parishioners, both Creole and Indians from mines, haciendas, and factories on his march of independence. After reaching the small town of Atotonilco, he grabbed a standard with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe from the local church, to serve as the battle flag of the insurgency. Soon the number of followers increased into the thousands and in a series of easy victories, he captured the towns of San Miguel, Celaya, Guanajuato, Valladolid and Toluca. Hidalgo, with no military training, had become the leader of a new "army" composed of mainly of illiterate Indian farm workers, laborers with no experience in military services and rudimentary equipment. After Valladolid, he set out for Mexico City, which was relatively unprotected and at the gates of Mexico City at Monte de las Cruces, 80,000 insurgents under Hidalgo and Ignacio Allende defeated the royalists on October 30, 1810. There was panic in Mexico City and Hidalgo demanded a surrender from Viceroy Venegas and requested to meet with him. Then, without waiting for a reply or giving an explanation and in a moment of apparent indecision, Father Hidalgo ordered a retreat toward Valladolid. The reason for this has never been adequately explained or understood.

The Viceroy meanwhile had requested immediate military support from one of his most able generals, General Félix María Calleja, who was stationed in the City of San Luis Potosí. On November 6, 1810 General Callejas arrived to the village of Arroyo Zarco on his way to Mexico City and he surprisingly learned that Father Hidalgo and his army were camped out in the neighbor village of Aculco, and about 70 miles North West of Mexico City. The following day Calleja made a surprise attack on the insurgent forces and delivered a devastating defeat to the already demoralized and deficiently armed insurgents, who were also disgruntled that Hidalgo had not attempted to take Mexico City.

Meanwhile, there had been uprisings in many parts of the country. Rafael Irate led insurgents in León and Zacatecas, and the friars Herrera and Valerians took possession of San Luis Potosí. In the northwest Juan B. Cases arrested the governor of Texas, in Nuevo León the governor declared its independence, and vice royal troops defected in Coahuila and Tamaulipas. In central Mexico were the troops of Tomas Ortiz, Benedicto Lopez, Julián and Chito Villagrán, Miguel Sánchez, and others. In the south José María Morelos, parish priest of Carácuaro and Nocupétaro, began his campaign. In the west there were three important

movements. One was headed by José María Mercado, parish priest of Ahualulco, who captured Tepic and the port of San Blas. Another, under José María González Hermsillo, won almost all of Sinaloa, including the port of Mazatlán. The third was led by José Antonio Torres, born in the Guanajuato, who entered Zamora with his army of insurgents.

After his defeat at Aculco, Hidalgo retired to Guadalajara where he issued decrees to give exclusive use of communal lands to their owners, to emancipate 6,000 black slaves, to eliminate state monopolies of tobacco, gunpowder, and playing cards, and to abolish the tributes paid by Indians. However general Callejas relentlessly pursued Hidalgo and their two armies met at the battle of Puente de Calderón, a decisive battle in the Mexican War of Independence, fought on the banks of the Calderón River 37 miles east of Guadalajara in present day Zapotlanejo, Jalisco. Almost 100,000 Mexican revolutionists participated in the battle commanded by Miguel Hidalgo, Ignacio Allende, Juan Aldama and Mariano Abasolo. The Royalist forces, made up of little more than 6,000 professional soldiers, and fighting for the King of Spain, were led by Félix María who was latter appointed viceroy of New Spain. He was later given the title of Count of Calderón for his victory that was a crucial moment for the rebels because from here on the tide turned against the insurgency of Father Hidalgo.

The insurgents fled north where, near Zacatecas, Hidalgo was divested of his military command in favor of Allende. In March they received an invitation by General Ignacio Elizondo of Nuevo Leon to meet at the Wells of Baján (Norias de Baján) in Coahuila, from where they would buy armaments in the United States. The first contingent arrived on March 21 with Allende, Aldama, Jiménez and Indalecio, son of Allende. They were welcomed and in an act of ambush, immediately taken prisoner. When the second contingent arrived with Abasolo, they were also captured and taken prisoner. Hidalgo ultimately arrived on horse and was personally apprehended by Elizondo. The prisoners were taken to Chihuahua where they were tried. Allende, Aldama and Jiménez were shot on June 26 and Hidalgo on July 30, 1811.

After the capture and execution of Hidalgo and Allende, José María Morelos y Pavón assumed leadership of the independence struggle. Morelos, like Hidalgo a priest, had a clearer vision of Mexico's future and employed superior organizational and political skills. Under Morelos a clear declaration of independence from Spain was made and a constitution drafted. Still, Morelos was unable to obtain Criollo backing for the struggle and he had to rely on Indian and mestizo support. He lost his position of leadership to his rivals in the movement, however, and in November 1815, while defending the escape of the insurgent government from loyalist attack, he was captured and executed.

Subsequently the struggle for independence broke down into a series of local revolts and guerrilla actions that did not seriously threaten the Viceroyalty. Most of the Creoles had accepted defeat, when a new series of events put them on the road to independence, In 1820, a liberal revolution in Spain forced King Fernando VII to reestablish the Constitution of Cádiz. The Cortes, which was made up of fervent liberals, insisted on measures against the wealth and immunities enjoyed by the Church. News of these reforms caused consternation among the Spanish group and the Creole aristocracy of Mexico. Viceroy Apodaca refused to apply the Constitution of Cádiz and instead approved the Plan de La Profesa which declared that as long as the king was under pressure from revolutionaries, his viceroy in Mexico would govern with the Laws of the Indies and with complete independence from Spain. However, when Governor Dávila was forced to proclaim constitutional order in Veracruz, the viceroy declared the

constitution to be in effect throughout the vice regal domain. He immediately proceeded to hold municipal elections and institute freedom of the press; and he thereby unwittingly set into motion the activity of organized groups. Spaniards who had supported the Plan de La Profesa tried to have it implemented, while rich Creoles saw the opportunity to achieve independence without the need to introduce social reforms. Both groups agreed that the leader to carry out their objectives was the Creole Colonel Agustín de Iturbide, a courageous, cruel, dissolute, and charming man who was never happier than when waging war.

Supported by the high clergy, the Spaniards, and the Creole owners of mines and haciendas, Iturbide, who had been commissioned to crush the revolutionary leader Vicente Guerrero, made a deal with the latter to join forces and together they announced the Plan of Iguala or the Three Guarantees: Roman Catholicism as the only recognized religion; equality of all Mexican citizens; and an independent Mexico with a constitutional monarch who would be a prefabricated king from one of the ruling houses of Europe. Then he launched a campaign on two fronts—diplomatic and military—which in five months had solved everything. The diplomatic consisted in gaining the friendship of the insurgent leaders against whom he had fought years earlier. The military campaign was brief and almost bloodless; many garrisons joined him willingly. Blaming Apodaca for the successes of Iturbide, the Spaniards in the capital again removed their viceroy, as in 1808, and they named Marshall Novella to replace him. A few days later, Juan O'Donojú arrived from Spain to take over the post of viceroy and he speedily came to terms with Iturbide. On August 24, 1821, he signed the Treaty of Córdoba, which ratified the substance of the Plan of Iguala. Iturbide led his victorious trigarante army into Mexico City on September 27, and the following day he was appointed head of the first independent government.

The consummation of independence produced great enthusiasm. In all the villages, towns, and cities there were parades with allegorical floats, triumphal arches, firework displays, and general rejoicing. Poets composed odes, sonnets, songs, marches, and verses in honor of the liberated nation. Several newspapers appeared and pamphlets were published; leaflets and letters obsessed with the subject of independence were circulated; there was talk of the wealth and economic resources of Mexico; it was said that the "location, fortune, and fertility of the new nation indicated that it had been created to give law to the whole world"; and it was announced that "the richest empire in the world was reestablished."

The parade that ensued was spectacular, as described in the accounts and pictures of the day: the green, white and red diagonal stripes of the flag of the three guarantees (symbolizing the purity of the Catholic religion, independence and the unity between Mexicans and Spaniards) could be seen waving above the army comprised of a combination of rebel and ex-royalist troops. They marched on a road hung with flags, banners and decorated with triumphal arches of the same colors and blazoned with the eagle and for the first time, a sense of nationhood, unity, belonging and self-determination would illuminate the sentiments of the Mexican nation. The capital welcomed the victors with a glad cacophony of sound: bells pealed, drums beat and trumpets sounded, rockets exploded in air and the crowd shouted enthusiastically. Rich and poor, whites, Indians and mestizos alike all filled the streets to celebrate the birth of the new nation.

In modern times, at the core of Mexican patriotism is Hidalgo's "Grito de Dolores". Every year, on the night of September 15, the President of the Republic "reenacts" the Grito on a balcony of the National Palace as the climax of the Independence Day celebrations and every Mexican

town emulates the celebrations in the capital. The first "fiestas patrias" were held in Texas in the early 1820s. They included festivities that involved special music, songs, dances, native cuisine, costumes, and homage to folk heroes. In these celebrations Tejanos displayed and preserved their ethnicity. Diez y Seis celebrations persisted in Texas from 1825 through the period of the republic and into the post-Civil War years. They spread to such towns along the border as Brownsville, Laredo, Eagle Pass, and El Paso, and to centrally located cities. Many eventually were held at county fair grounds and drew large crowds.

The celebrations extended to the former territories of Mexico, now a part of the United States of America and for years the ceremony of the Grito de Dolores has also been enacted in many US cities.

The centennial celebration of September 15, 1911 in Mexico City was particularly memorable because many new buildings and monuments were inaugurated, including the monuments to the revolution an imposing column, topped by a golden Angel of Independence. The monument honors all the known and unknown heroes of Mexican independence. At 11:00 pm on that September, 1910, President Porfirio Díaz stood on the main balcony of the National Palace, and once again rang the same bell Hidalgo had rung in Dolores. He shouted several vivas: "Long Live the Heroes of the Nation!" "Long Live the Republic!" Below him, in the majestic zócalo that, from the days of the Aztecs had been the ceremonial heart of the Mexican Nation, a hundred thousand voices shouted in reply "¡VIVA!". President Juarez would become a major actor in the events of the following November, that gave rise to the Mexican Revolution of 1910.