Francisco I. Madero

(1873 - 1913)

Francisco Madero was an unlikely candidate to become the man who triggered the Mexican revolution. Born in 1873 into one of the wealthiest families in Mexico, he nevertheless had empathy with the common people. The Madero family hacienda was in the northern state of Coahuila, but the financial influence of the Maderos was felt in many industries from textiles to mining, vineyards, rubber and coal.

As a teenager, Madero took up his father's interest in Spiritualism, which he maintained for the rest of his life. He was a gentle man, a scholar who had studied agriculture at UC Berkeley in the U.S. Madero also had an interest in homeopathic medicine, and made sure the workers on the family hacienda were treated well.

One of his heroes was the great Mexican revolutionary, Benito Juárez, who in Madero's mind stood for democracy. So it is understandable that even very early on, Madero was frustrated with the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz.

In the earliest years of the 20th century, Madero formed an organization to promote democracy and founded several newspapers that decried the continued power of Díaz. In 1908, he read an interview with Díaz in Pearson's magazine (a U.S. publication). In the interview with journalist James Creelman, Díaz said that he would be willing to step down and let a democratically-elected president take over in 1910, at the end of his term. Díaz said that Mexico was ready for a full-fledged democracy. It's unlikely that he meant it, but Madero's passion for democracy was sparked. In a move that raised his profile significantly, he published a book that same year, entitled La sucesión presidencial en 1910. The book was a bestseller, and was read (often along with the Creelman article) all over Mexico.

The book did not condemn Díaz completely. Madero expressed the opinion that the Díaz regime had gone on too long and had gained too much power. The dictator had kept Mexico from its true democratic destiny by assuming the presidency term after term. The book called for Díaz to step down in 1910, and supported free elections.

In 1909, Madero founded the first anti-reelection club in Mexico City. Soon anti-reelectionist clubs were being established all over the country. Madero had tapped into a national dissatisfaction with the dictator. As a result, he was arrested by Díaz's administration in 1910, but the influence of his father helped get him out of jail. He subsequently escaped across the border to Texas. Díaz did hold elections – but he declared himself President again. In exile in Texas, Madero wrote his proclamation, the Plan de San Luis Potosí. It called for the election to be declared null and void, and for Díaz to be overthrown. Madero returned to Mexico on November 20, 1910, and launched a revolution.

There were numerous uprisings around the country in Madero's name; many were connected to the anti-reelection clubs he had inspired. In February 1911, the revolution gained momentum as Madero and his men attacked the city of Casas Grandes in Chihuahua. It was a defeat for Díaz's federales. The next move was to have been an attack on Ciudad Juárez. But only a narrow stretch of the Rio Grande River separated Juárez from El Paso, Texas, and Madero had been warned that if the fight got too close to the U.S. border, Americans might get hurt, and the international repercussions could be disastrous. As a result, Madero planned on holding off his attack. However, his generals, Pascual Orozco and Francisco Villa, were eager to fight. They attacked Juárez against Madero's orders, and defeated Díaz's federal troops. It was the decisive battle of a very short war. In May, 1911, shortly after the battle, a peace treaty was signed and Porfirio Díaz agreed to resign and to go into exile. An interim president took office so that official elections could be called.

Source: http://www.pbs.org/itvs/storm-that-swept-mexico/the-revolution/faces-revolution/
On the afternoon of June 7, Madero and his Maderistas marched triumphantly into Mexico City and the whole country celebrated. But perhaps prophetically, a tragic earthquake had struck the city early that morning. Rescuers took time off from sifting through the rubble to attend the celebration, then went back to their grim work. Cracks appeared in the walls of the National Palace, a symbol of things to come.

In November, 1911, Francisco I. Madero became the first new President of Mexico in almost 30 years. From the beginning, he was a moderate. He wanted to challenge Díaz, but he did not want to institute policies that went against the rich landowner class to which his family belonged. He kept most of the power structure created by Díaz intact, much to the dismay of those who had hoped for significant change. Very quickly, Madero alienated his former allies, Pascual Orozco and Emiliano Zapata.

In 1912, Orozco partnered with Zapata and declared open rebellion against Madero. Madero sent General Victoriano Huerta to put down the revolt. Huerta, a ruthless fighter, handily eliminated Orozco as a threat and sent him across the border into the U.S., where he was soon murdered.

But Madero had raised public expectations far beyond the modest reforms he was willing to make. The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, was also concerned about Madero; he thought the new president might overturn Díaz's former support of foreign business interests and therefore jeopardize U.S. control of oil, mining, and other investments in Mexico.

In early 1913, Wilson conspired with Huerta and others to institute a coup to overthrow Madero and his Vice-President, Pino Suarez. What followed was a period known as the decena trágica, or "ten tragic days." Mexico City became a battleground, as the conspirators fought to overtake the federal troops loyal to Madero. When the smoke cleared, and the bodies were carried off, Huerta had taken control of Mexico, and Madero and Pino Suarez were under arrest. Days later, Huerta had them assassinated, and declared himself President of Mexico.