The Raid on Columbus, New Mexico: Pancho Villa's Vengeance or Something More?

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In the history of the border town of Columbus, New Mexico, the morning of March 9, 1916 will be remembered forever. It was on this particular date that Francisco "Pancho" Villa and his caballería (cavalry) boldly crossed the United States border under the cover of early morning darkness. Upon their arrival at Columbus, for more than two hours Villa and his force of 485 men proceeded to wreak havoc on the 400 residents and 300 soldiers garrisoned adjacent to the town at Camp Furlong. By 7:30 A.M., the rallying efforts of the garrison's machine-gun troop forced the Villistas into a hasty retreat. The remains of the Commercial Hotel were still smoldering while the bodies of eighteen Americans and more than ninety Villistas lay strewn about the dusty streets.¹ This was a terrible incident that took the people of both Columbus and the entire United States by surprise. This attack raises the question why Villa, the former leader of the powerful División del Norte, would attack the sleepy little town of Columbus and jeopardize himself to retaliation by the United States?

The years that followed the raid were filled with conflicting rumors about Villa's true intentions. There was, also, much debate as to the number of Villistas involved, the role Pancho Villa actually played in the raid, and whether his plans were successful. These rumors and

Controversies have led many writers since that time to interpret the actions of Villa as being those of a terrorist bent on revenge and bloodshed. Perhaps the labeling of Villa as a terrorist allowed the writers of the day to bring an element of foreboding to their stories. Nevertheless, they never fully developed the reasons behind the attack. After reading contemporary articles in the newspapers, such as "Bandit and Followers Creep into Columbus and Start Massacre," many Americans did not feel the need to examine the matter any further.

Although more than eighty years have passed, the rumors and controversies of the event can now be evaluated more objectively. Through the deconstruction of the events that unfolded before and during that night in New Mexico, historians can now piece together a more accurate view of the reasons behind the attack on Columbus. Only through this approach can one find and establish the major truths hidden beneath the surface. However, to fully comprehend the incidents that led to the assault on New Mexico one must examine the events that preceded Villa's raid. It is important to look at Pancho Villa's career, rising from outlaw to revolutionary general.

In 1894, a young peasant farmer named Doroteo Arango returned from a long day in the fields to find his twelve-

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year-old sister hiding behind their mother. Señora Arango was trying to keep the hacienda owner, Don Augustín López Negrete, from abducting her daughter. The enraged Doroteo retrieved a pistol and shot López Negrete in the foot. The young peasant did not wait around to see what the authorities might do to him. Without hesitation, Doroteo packed his meager belongings and headed for the hills.

For the next fifteen years, Doroteo led the life of an outlaw. Changing his name to Pancho Villa, the former indentured servant joined a gang of cattle rustlers and gained widespread renown. The primary targets of Villa's cattle rustling ventures were the wealthy landowners throughout northern Mexico. Villa learned how to survive and prosper, despite the growing number of wanted posters with his likeness on them.

After years of hiding from authorities and robbing the wealthy, Villa met a man who changed his life. Although Villa had once tried to steal from him, the intellectual Don Abraham González impressed the young outlaw and convinced Villa to join "the revolution for the people." With the support of González, Villa became a low ranking officer in

5Martín Luis Guzmán, 4-5
6Katz, 70.
7Martín Luis Guzmán, 21.
the local militia.\textsuperscript{8} Ironically, this militia was funded by
landowners that Villa had stolen cattle from just months
before.

Within two short years, Villa was promoted to the rank
of general in the revolutionary military. By 1914, Villa
was in charge of 40,000 troops and had become one of the
most successful leaders of the Mexican Revolution.\textsuperscript{9} Villa
was at the apex of his power and popularity. Seen as a sort
of Robin Hood by the poor, Villa shed his reputation as an
outlaw and became an admirable and, seemingly, invincible
leader.\textsuperscript{10} Unfortunately for Villa, his glorious
accomplishments would soon prove to be fleeting.

In retrospect, 1915 was not a successful year for
Pancho Villa. Problems had been brewing between Villa and
his nominal superior, Venustiano Carranza, for the better
part of a year. Although both Villa and Carranza had fought
to rid Mexico of Victoriano Huerta's regime, Villa
associated himself with the cause of the land-less peasants
that worked their entire lives for wealthy landowners.
Carranza, by contrast, was a wealthy hacendado (landowner)
who was never a proponent of democracy. Carranza supported
the Mexican elite and large business. He never made any

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 22-24.
\textsuperscript{9}Clarence C. Clendenen, \textit{Blood on the Border: The United
States and the Mexican Irregulars} (London: Collier-Macmillan
Ltd., 1969), 177.
\textsuperscript{10}Katz, 74.
demands for social reform and failed to gain the support of the peasant majority.\textsuperscript{11}

After Huerta's power had waned significantly, the revolutionary leaders of Mexico agreed to hold a convention in Mexico City to discuss a future government for their country. According to Clarence Clendenen, the convention was later moved to Aguascalientes due to Pancho Villa's enormous influence and power.\textsuperscript{12} Carranza, possibly looking for any excuse to detach himself from the largely uneducated group of revolutionaries led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, chose not to attend the convention. In addition, Carranza refused to recognize any agreement made at the convention and openly broke off relations with the other revolutionary groups.\textsuperscript{13} When the convention chose Eulalio Gutiérrez as the next president of Mexico, a man known to have close ties to the Villista cause, Carranza's posture stiffened, thus prolonging Mexico's internal conflicts and eliminating any hope of a peaceful settlement.\textsuperscript{14}

For several months there was little contact between the Carrancistas and the Villistas. Although Villa challenged the convention with the radical proposal that both he and Carranza be executed in order to avoid prolonging the revolution, the delegates did not take him seriously and

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 199-203.
\textsuperscript{12}Clendenen, Blood on the Border, 177.
\textsuperscript{13}Martín Luis Guzmán, 342-343.
\textsuperscript{14}Clendenen, Blood on the Border, 177.
tensions between the two remained high.15 It was during this time that the armies of both men were regrouping and preparing to resolve the issue of leadership on the battlefield.

Accounts suggest that Villa and his División del Norte were well prepared to face the Carrancista forces. The army was equipped with 40,000 soldiers, a surplus of arms and ammunition, locomotives, artillery, and hundreds of box-cars containing valuable provisions and supplies.16 Added to this, many Villistas and Americans alike assumed that Villa had the full support of the United States.17

Villa had maintained close relations with General Hugh Scott, the commander of the U.S. forces along the border, who later became the United States Chief of Staff. General Scott had a sincere admiration for Pancho Villa and felt that he was the one revolutionary in Mexico who managed to sustain order in the states under his control. Scott also maintained that Villa had always been helpful to the United States.18 Villa, in the eyes of General Scott, was honest and exceedingly fair in dealing with the demands made of him by the United States. Even after the United States recognized Carranza as president of Mexico in October of

15Martín Luis Guzmán, 348.
16Clendennen, Blood on the Border, 177-178.
18Katz, 318-319.
1915, Villa continued to trust General Scott who wrote in his memoirs that "No white man, no Negro, no Indian, no Moro, nor any person, however humble, ever had as much right as Villa to believe I had turned against him, yet he telegraphed a mutual friend in New York that General Scott was the only honest man north of Mexico." 19

With all of these factors combined Pancho Villa and the División del Norte appeared to be unstoppable against Carranza's forces. Villa and his troops left Mexico City in April of 1915 and headed south towards the Guanajuato capital of Celaya. Having met little resistance up to that point, Villa expected a swift victory over the remaining territories.20 Unfortunately for Villa, the commanding Carrancista general at Celaya was a very capable leader named Alvaro Obregón.

Obregón was an adept individual who studied the military strategies being implemented in Europe as World War I raged far away. He recognized that at the beginning of the war both sides had relied heavily on cavalry, but large numbers of men in trenches surrounded by machine guns and barbed wire could simply eliminate any threat of cavalry charges.21 Pancho Villa, in contrast to Obregón, had not

21Katz, 488.
paid attention to strategic developments outside of Mexico. Unfortunately, his lack of knowledge in world affairs and current military strategies would prove to be his downfall.

Obregón, anticipating that the cavalry dependent Villa would not deviate from his normal mode of operation, applied European trench warfare at the town of Celaya. The town and surrounding area were covered with irrigation ditches that criss-crossed a large expanse of farmland. These ditches allowed Obregón to transform them with minimal effort into heavily fortified trenches. He then set a trap for Villa and his men.

The only weakness in Obregón's plan lay in the fact that the supplies that his army relied on had to be brought by rail from Vera Cruz through territories held by Zapata and Villa. The Villistas and Zapatistas could have easily severed the communication and supply lines to Obregón's forces. Villa's top advisor, Felipe Angeles suggested that Villa devise such a plan. An overconfident Villa dismissed Angeles' suggestion, referring to his adversary as "El Perfumado", as if Obregón were more of a show piece than a battle hardened general.

On the morning of April 6, Villa and his men attacked the entrenched soldiers head-on. This particular tactic had

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23 Ibid, 15.
24 Katz, 488.
given Villa's División del Norte an undefeated record throughout the revolution.25 The entrenched men of Obregón's forces held their ground and were eventually able to push back Villa's forces and launched a counter-attack on April 7 that virtually wiped out the "Dorados", Villa's elite cavalry unit.26

The proud, and perhaps stunned, Pancho Villa did not evaluate the reasons for his defeat. For several days the Villistas recuperated while Obregón and his troops stockpiled much needed ammunition and supplies. On April 13, Villa and Obregón's forces met once more on the battlefield of Celaya. Again, Villa tried a disastrous frontal cavalry charge.27 His attack was checked by Obregón's machine gun installments. The battle raged on for more than twenty-four hours. According to John Eisenhower, the Villistas lost as many as 9,000 soldiers in the battle for Celaya.28 This humiliating defeat showed that Villa had a "lack of strategic and tactical ability on par with Obregón."29

It is hard to imagine any military leader continuing to fight after having been handed two defeats of the magnitude Villa suffered at Celaya. Villa, however, had an

27 Stout, 17.
28 Eisenhower, 179.
29 Katz, 540.
unlimited supply of courage and confidence, which had often produced success but at Celaya proved detrimental. In June of 1915, Villa was confronted by Obregón near the town of León. In this battle he recognized a need to change his tactics and ordered his men to entrench themselves between León and Trinidad.\textsuperscript{30}

Villa's new defensive tactic led to a forty-day battle.\textsuperscript{31} The impatient Villa, however, was not used to the long delays brought about by trench warfare. Determined to end the standstill, he took his reserve and tried to maneuver behind Obregón's forces. The vigilant Obregón had anticipated Villa's impatience and charged the exposed Villista forces. Approximately 3,000 Villistas were killed during Obregón's massive offensive.\textsuperscript{32} Although the battle cost Obregón an arm, he managed to defeat Villa once again.\textsuperscript{33} The Villistas retreated to Aguascalientes.\textsuperscript{34}

A month later in July of 1915, Villa fought Obregón's Carrancista army at Torreón. Villa's badly depleted force was constantly barraged by the increasing forces. The relentless fighting had taken its toll on Villa's force who could no longer put up a significant defense. By the end of July Villa was forced to retreat further north into

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid, 494.  
\textsuperscript{31}Eisenhower, 180.  
\textsuperscript{32}Katz, 496.  
\textsuperscript{33}Stout, 16-17.  
\textsuperscript{34}Katz, 496-497.
Chihuahua. With his forces demoralized and depleted, Villa's once 40,000 strong División del Norte began to dissolve. It would never again be a major military force in the Mexican Revolution.

In October of 1915, President Wilson, against the advice of General Hugh Scott, officially recognized the Carranza government as the true governing body of Mexico. This decision was probably due to the fact that World War I was raging in Europe and the United States wanted to secure a peaceful government in Mexico as soon as possible. Seeing that Villa and his forces were severely weakened by the defeat at Celaya, President Wilson thought it would be in Mexico's and the United States' interest to support the leader who appeared to be the most in control.

The timing of Wilson's decision could not have been worse for Villa. In November of 1915 Villa tried desperately to occupy the northwestern state of Sonora. Villa's last hope for maintaining a grasp on his fading power lay in this desert state. At a place called Aqua Prieta, Villa faced Plutarco Elías Calles, another Carrancista general. The beleaguered Villa and his soldiers were defeated once again. The Carrancistas proved to be too much for them.

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35Stout, 17.  
36Tompkins, 35-36.  
37Stout, 18.  
38Clendenen, Blood on the Border, 187.
Villa later learned that Calles' army had been able to rout his División del Norte by crossing through Douglas, Arizona. In an arrangement between Wilson and Carranza, the Carrancistas were allowed to ride on American trains. Moreover, the United States provided the Carrancistas with powerful military spotlights to illuminate the approaching Villistas in the dead of night. Needless to say, the Villistas were caught in the middle of the desert without a place to hide. The death toll was staggering with Villa barely making it out alive.

Although the battle at Agua Prieta was not the final engagement for the División del Norte, it was a definite indicator that the end was coming. After several more small confrontations with Carranza's troops, the tired and badly depleted Villistas found their way back to the state of Chihuahua. By December of 1915 the División del Norte was officially disbanded with only a couple hundred of Villa's most loyal troops remaining by his side. The glory days of Villismo were coming to an abrupt end.

Villa, by this point, was a very angry man. He was furious with the United States for having formally recognized his enemy, Venustiano Carranza, as the official President of Mexico, for providing the floodlights used against him at Agua Prieta, and for allowing Calles' army to

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39Katz, 526.
be transported across U.S. soil. By contrast, Villa could not even buy munitions legally in America. Villa was also angry over the fact that of the thirty states in Mexico that had once supported both he and fellow popular revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata, now only Chihuahua favored him. That support, however, was also waning. Nevertheless, Villa was far from giving up and retiring to his ranch in Chihuahua. The once proud and courageous leader of the División del Norte had ceased to be a prominent political figure. In order to survive as a force in Mexican politics, he decided to become a guerrilla fighter and make his enemies pay for what they had done to him.

From December 1915 until the raid on Columbus, New Mexico, Pancho Villa and his group of guerrillas raided, looted, and extorted money and supplies from ranchers and miners all along the border between the United States and Mexico. The mines owned by the Americans, such as the Cusi mine, and those of other foreign countries were favorite targets for Villa and his gang. In fact, Villa and his men were so famous for their raiding that they were even blamed for incidents in Arizona, Texas, and Mexico in which

42 Katz, 533.
they did not even participate.\textsuperscript{44} The resources from these raids allowed Villa to attack Carrancista troops wherever possible.

Villa's attacks on the mining industry in Chihuahua were significant for two reasons. The first was to allocate funds and supplies for his poorly equipped band. The second was to discourage American entrepreneurs so they would seek their fortune elsewhere. By preventing a large economic base in Chihuahua, Villa hoped to further weaken the Carrancista administration that was trying to occupy the state.\textsuperscript{45} The largest problem Villa faced with this strategy was that the general population was unhappy about losing the jobs and business the mines provided to their communities. If Villa were to lose the flow of revenue he was extorting from the mines, then he would find it extremely difficult to fight the Carrancista troops infiltrating into his remaining domain of Chihuahua. However, losing public support could hinder his ability to remain outside of Carranza's grasp.

Much to the chagrin of the Chihuahuan citizens, Villa decided that it was in his best interest to continue his raids on the foreign mining operations.\textsuperscript{46}

Although the raids on the mining companies throughout Chihuahua were creating problems among American

\textsuperscript{44}Haldeen Braddy, \textit{The Paradox of Pancho Villa} (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1978), 4.

\textsuperscript{45}Katz, 557.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.
entrepreneurs, Villa maintained agreeable relationships with some individuals throughout the border towns of the United States. The majority of these individuals were merchants, such as businessman Sam Ravel of Columbus, New Mexico, who provided him with the materials that he needed to supply his group.\(^{47}\) Putting his anger aside about United States policy, it was through these merchants that Villa purchased the guns, food, horses, and clothing that were essential to his raids against Carranza's forces. Unfortunately, fate once again frowned upon the struggling Villa.

In January of 1916, at the request of the Carranza government, a train carrying American mining officials, engineers, and Hispanic assistants headed out of El Paso, Texas on its way to a Chihuahuan mine.\(^{48}\) Believing the route to be free of bandits, the passengers were being sent to Mexico to assess the viability of reopening a mine. The train had just reached a small station east of Chihuahua, known as Santa Isabel, when it suddenly stopped. A group of bandits, led by Pablo López of Villa's gang, swarmed the train and began dragging the Americans outside. The majority were then shot beside the tracks and all of their possessions were taken from them. The remaining passengers were left alive, but, they too were robbed of any valuables.\(^{49}\)

\(^{47}\)Braddy, *Pancho Villa at Columbus*, 10.
\(^{49}\)Katz, 558.
News of the massacre soon reached the United States and a public outcry for justice could be heard all along the border. Not wanting to cause an international scene, President Wilson decided it was best to let Carranza handle the matter himself.\textsuperscript{50} However, this event would prove to be utterly devastating for Villa. Even though Villa insisted that López had acted on his own,\textsuperscript{51} many of the merchants who had dealt with Villa for several years, now fearing U.S. reprisals, ceased all business transactions with him.\textsuperscript{52} Without the materials supplied by the American merchants, Villa could not maintain his group of guerrillas and support his fight against Carranza.

The months that followed the Santa Isabel massacre took their toll on Villa's men. Large numbers of his luchadores (fighters) deserted and became members of Carranza's troops while others simply disappeared. Those who did remain with Villa were severely demoralized and on the verge deserting him. According to Haldeen Braddy, "Villa needed to revive

\textsuperscript{50}Clendenen, \textit{Blood on the Border}, 199.
\textsuperscript{51}Tompkins, 41. There is some dispute over Villa's role in this incident. Some historians believe that Villa was on his way to turn himself in to a newspaper man named George Seese in New Mexico with proof of his innocence in the matter. Please see Edgcumb Pinchon, \textit{Viva Villa!: A Recovery of the Real Pancho Villa, Peon...Bandit...Soldier...Patriot} (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), 335-336. Also see Friedrich Katz, \textit{The Life and Times of Pancho Villa}, 565. However, the author has not been able to establish whether or not there is any truth with regards to this story, it may very well be another Villa legend.
\textsuperscript{52}Herbert Molloy Mason Jr., \textit{The Great Pursuit} (New York: Random House, 1970), 64.
his band into the military force it had once been and he needed more bounty than the countryside of Chihuahua had to offer." The time had come to take drastic measures to ensure the survival of the Villista cause.

Beginning in February of 1916, in a desperate attempt to gain more capital, the Villistas began to rob, extort, or kill mostly American ranchers and travelers along the border. Villa also started a campaign of conscripting former veterans of the División del Norte back into his service. If the soldiers refused they were immediately executed either by firing squad or hanging. Now, armed with as many troops and supplies as he could muster, Villa set his sights on the border town of Columbus, New Mexico.

The decision by Villa to attack the tiny border town is not the unsolved mystery that historians such as James W. Hurst make it out to be. Hurst states that, "There is not now, and probably never will be, a conclusive answer to the question [of why Villa attacked Columbus]." In addition to Hurst, author Friedrich Katz also states that "it is not clear why this small town, consisting mainly of wooden structures...had been chosen as the target of Villa's raid."

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53 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 9.
54 Katz, 561.
56 Katz, 563.
However, these writers have failed to take into account that for many years Villa had close ties to the town of Columbus. As mentioned earlier, Sam Ravel, one of the most prosperous men in the town, had sold the Villistas supplies both during and after the revolution. Also, Villa had once been friendly with some of the military personnel garrisoned at Camp Furlong on the outskirts of town. Nevertheless, it was exactly this familiarity with Columbus that made it such a good target for the desperate bandits.

United States officials had known for some time that Villa was considering attacking American soil, they just did not know where the impending raid would take place. The major consensus was that El Paso would be the likely target. Villa had maintained a wife and residence there during his cattle rustling days before the revolution and again in 1913. Due to Villa's familiarity with the city, Fort Bliss, the military outpost connected to El Paso, was put on alert and began sending daily patrols along the border for several weeks. Although the anticipated attack never came, the patrols from Fort Bliss remained along the Rio Grande.

58 Mason, 5-6.
59 Katz, 185-186.
60 Braddy, *Pancho Villa at Columbus*, 12.
Camp Furlong, at Columbus, also stepped up its patrols along the international line.\textsuperscript{61} However, the townspeople of Columbus felt that there was little to worry about. According to Haldeen Braddy, the people of Columbus thought that Villa might attack the town of Palomas in the state of Chihuahua just over the border from the New Mexico line.\textsuperscript{62} The military, especially towards the end of February and the beginning of March 1916, began to lessen their patrols between the United States and Mexico.

Although many of the residents felt they had little cause for concern, there were definite warning signals about an impending attack on Columbus. On March 2, 1916, there were three Villistas captured by Carranza's troops near Casas Grandes, Mexico. These Villistas are reported to have confessed that they would attack the Mexican town of Hachita or Columbus, New Mexico.\textsuperscript{63} The Carrancistas relayed this information to the United States. However, Colonel Slocum, the commanding officer at Camp Furlong, had received many reports on Villa's whereabouts and could actually prove very few.\textsuperscript{64}

On the morning of March 8, Juan Favela, a resident of Columbus, rode his horse out to the Boca Grande River to

\textsuperscript{61}Please see Appendix.
\textsuperscript{62}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64}Tompkins, 46-47.
meet the foreman of the Palomas Cattle Company, Arthur McKinney. According to Favela, he had just ridden over the top of a hill when he saw McKinney and two other employees of the Palomas Company sitting by the river talking to a group of Hispanic men. Apparently, Favela recognized Pancho Villa as one of the men talking to McKinney. Just as Favela neared the encampment, a Villista hung McKinney with a piece of wire and shot the other two hands dead. Favela barely managed to escape.65

According to Favela, he sent another ranch hand named Antonio Muñoz to oversee the activities of Villa and his men. Favela learned from Muñoz that the Villistas were headed towards Columbus.66 Favela then approached another Columbus citizen, B.M. Reed, with the news. Both Reed and Favela discussed the matter with Colonel Slocum.67

Unfortunately, Colonel Slocum stated that he already had patrols just south of town as well as verifiable report that Villa was headed south towards the Mexican town of Gúzman.68 Favela insisted that he was brushed off by the

65Peterson, 214-215.
66Columbus Video Journal: Early Columbus, N.M. and Pancho Villa’s Raid, produced by John and July McClure, 50 min., McVideo Productions, 1994, videocassette. There is some dispute as to whether it was Favela or Muñoz who reported to Colonel Slocum. However, the town residents interviewed maintain that it was the well respected Favela.
67Peterson, 216.
68Tompkins, 43.
colonel who just hours later left Columbus for Deming, New Mexico.69

Villa and his forces had been camped at Boca Grande, just a few miles south of Columbus, for several days. During the early morning on March 8, Villa sent Lieutenant Colonel Vargas to scout out the garrison and the town.70 While Vargas and his troops were gone, Villa is reported to have expressed some misgivings about attacking Columbus. He had accidentally allowed two witnesses to escape, Favela and Muñoz, and was worried that they may warn Columbus of his location.71 Villa decided it was best to wait and see what Vargas had found out before committing himself to the attack.

Vargas returned to the camp at Bocas Grandes in the early afternoon and reported that there were only between fifty and 100 soldiers on the post at Camp Furlong.72 Although the report seemed encouraging, Villa sat in silence and thought about his course of action very carefully. The thought of whether or not to trust Vargas' estimation must have troubled the bandit chief. If Villa did possess any doubts, he resolved them by 4:00 P.M. on March 8 when he and

69Peterson, 216. Accounts are sketchy, at best, as to the exact whereabouts of Colonel Slocum during the battle. Juan Favela insisted that Slocum left Columbus for Deming, New Mexico. According to Tompkins' Chasing Villa, page 55, Colonel Slocum is not seen until the Mexican invaders have been driven out of the town.
70Katz, 563.
71Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 14-15.
72Ibid, 15.
his men began to pack up the camp and head out towards Columbus.\textsuperscript{73} Nevertheless, the men still did not know the exact plan of what was going to transpire once they arrived at their destination.\textsuperscript{74}

At approximately one in the morning of March 9, the determined group of horsemen cut the barbed wire fence that separated the two countries and killed a night watchman in Palomas.\textsuperscript{75} The Villistas then proceeded to a dried river bed that ran parallel with the railroad tracks leading towards the town of Columbus. It was in this arroyo that Villa is said to have ordered everyone to dismount.

Villa ordered the officers of his group to gather around him so that they could hear about the maneuver he had developed on the ride towards Columbus. The plan was to develop two columns, one was to attack from the east, the other was to envelop the town and then advance upon it from the north. Villa and a small reserve would wait just south of the military garrison to provide additional support if needed.\textsuperscript{76}

While Villa and his band were finalizing their plans for the attack, a young U.S. Army lieutenant named Ralph Lucas was just coming into town on the midnight train out of El Paso. Lieutenant Lucas, along with several other

\textsuperscript{73}Eisenhower, 221.
\textsuperscript{74}Katz, 564.
\textsuperscript{75}The American Experience: The Hunt for Pancho Villa, 1993, videocassette.
\textsuperscript{76}Clendenen, Blood on the Border, 204.
officers of the camp, had been in Texas playing polo. Lucas had decided that instead of waiting until the next day, he preferred to ride the rail at night and sleep in his own bed back at Columbus. The decision by Lucas to come back to base early possibly changed the outcome of Villa's raid.  

Before retiring to his cot for the night, Lucas loaded his revolver that was unloaded by his roommate who had been sent on border patrol a few days before. The tired Lieutenant then went to bed only to be wakened a couple hours later by an unknown person riding past his window. The sleepy Lucas poked his head out the window and noticed right away that the person on horseback was not an American soldier, the person was wearing a Mexican sombrero and was wielding a rifle.  

While Lucas was thrashing about in his quarters trying to get dressed, another soldier, Private Fred Griffin, was on guard duty just across from Lucas' hut when he saw the Villistas and ordered them to halt. Shots rang out and, although he was mortally wounded, Private Griffin managed to return fire and kill several Villistas before succumbing to his wounds. The raid on Columbus had begun.

There have been many arguments over the exact time the raid commenced. There is a picture, however, of the train

77Tompkins, 50-52.  
78Ibid, 51.  
79Stout, 36.  
80Ibid.  
81Columbus Video Journal, 1994, videocassette.
depot clock stopped by a bullet at 4:11 A.M.\textsuperscript{82} Confirmed by eyewitness testimony, we can assume that the raid started within a few minutes of the time indicated on the clock. Regardless of the time, Villa and his forces must have been extremely surprised to find that there were actually more than 300 soldiers at Camp Furlong that night and not the fifty to 100 as reported by Vargas.\textsuperscript{83} Although the cover of darkness allowed the Villistas to enter the town almost undetected, once the soldiers realized what was happening and were able to organize themselves, the fighting became intense.

Thanks to the efforts of Mrs. E.G. Parks, the rest of the United States learned of the attack within a couple hours of the initial raid. Mrs. Parks, a night telephone operator in Columbus, was hit by flying glass and nearly missed being shot when a group of Villistas shot up her office in an attempt to sever communications with the outside world. Mrs. Parks managed to remain at the switchboard and called the Deming, New Mexico operator. The Deming operator was able to sound the alarm, alerting a group of military personnel stationed at Deming and in Texas.\textsuperscript{84} Mrs. Parks was just one of many woman in Columbus who became heroines for their courage during the raid.

\textsuperscript{82}Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 17.
\textsuperscript{83}Katz 563.
\textsuperscript{84}Stout, 38.
The gunfire exchanged between Griffin and Villistas wakened the officer of the day, Lieutenant Castleman. Castleman rushed out of his house and collided with a Villista who tried to shoot the American at point blank range and somehow missed. Castleman, dazed and confused, returned fire and then headed for the center of town to join Cavalry Troop F. Taking command of the American soldiers who had made it to his position, Castleman quickly organized a counterattack.

Meanwhile, the barefoot Lieutenant Lucas managed to reach the guard tent and removed one of the Benet-Mercier machine guns. Other men quickly joined Lucas' counter-assault on the Villista intruders. According to Lieutenant Lucas, the Benet-Mercier machine guns were temperamental and jammed frequently. Therefore, as the fight continued, Lucas and his men were in a constant search for guns and ammunition.

For more than two hours the battle raged throughout the dusty streets. The townspeople were hiding in their homes, in outhouses, and adobe huts. Some of the more confused souls ran out into the desert and did not stop until they were exhausted. The previously dark town became bathed in the orange glow from the flames engulfing the Commercial

85Ibid, 36.
86Tompkins, 52.
87Clendenen, The United States and Villa, 240.
88Tompkins, 52.
89Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 31.
Hotel in the center of Main Street. The glow from the fire allowed the Americans to distinguish the raiders from civilians and soldiers as machine gun and rifle fire ripped through the still desert air. Soldiers and Villistas could be heard shouting throughout the buildings and streets. The sleepy town of Columbus became the site of mass confusion and utter chaos.

Jessie Thompson, the granddaughter of the Commercial Hotel manager, remembers that her family was awakened by the commotion. The guests of the hotel were all gathered upstairs when the Villistas broke in and demanded to see Sam Ravel who was in El Paso. William Ritchie, the manager, tried to tell the Villistas that Ravel was not in town. However, upon hearing this, the raiders began to loot the patrons and ordered that Ritchie and three other men be taken outside and shot. The guerrillas then lit the building on fire after thoroughly looting all they could.

Jessie Thompson stood in the hotel with her mother, grandmother, and the bride of one of the guests who had been killed. The four women were shaking at the events that had unfolded before their very eyes. Juan Favela, who had been staying in town that night, rushed in and led the women to an adobe hut owned by his mother-in-law. Tragically,

90Clendenen, Blood on the Border, 205.
92Peterson, 219.
Jessie had to step over the top of her dead grandfather in order to run for safety. 93

People fought with anything at hand. Angry cooks, for example, repelled a group of Villistias trying to break into Camp Furlong's kitchen and food storage area. 94 The cooks used cleavers, fists and an old shotgun to dissuade the Villistias from looting the food storage. The stable guards were no less effective when one of the members used a baseball bat to subdue one of the raiders. 95

By dawn, the rallying efforts of the American machine-gun troop, led by the courageous barefoot Lieutenant Lucas, were far too great for the Villistias to cope with. 96 Slowly, the raiders began to pull out of Columbus and head for the border, taking as many of the wounded with them as they could. The remaining Villistias had withdrawn from the fight by 7:30 A.M. 97 Villa and about thirty of the reserve riflemen, who were still hiding in the dried river bed on the outskirts of town, released two hostages, Maud Hawk Wright 98 and Buck Spencer 99, whom they had captured on the ride north. The reservists led by Villa then headed back to Mexico behind their retreating companions.

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93Thompson, 30.
94Please see Appendix.
95Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 25-26.
96Stout, 36.
97Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 30.
99Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 31.
Maud Wright had been captured by the Villistas at her ranch near Colonia Hernandez nine days before the Columbus raid. Mrs. Wright was separated from her husband, who was never seen again. She was then forced to give her baby to the maid. To prevent a possible escape attempt, Mrs. Wright was tied to a mule while the Villistas made their way towards Columbus. It is important to note that Mrs. Wright actually talked to and identified the leader of the bandits as Pancho Villa. According to Mrs. Wright, Villa had been dressed as a common bandit near the rear of his band until the night of the attack when he dressed in full military attire. The testimony of Mrs. Wright proves that Villa was present at the raid but remained in the reserve and did not join in the fighting.

Just before the raid ended, Mrs. Wright made a plea to be released and was granted this request. Together with an African-American prisoner named Buck Spencer, Mrs. Wright made her way into town. Wright came across a badly wounded woman named Mrs. Moore. Moore's husband had been killed during the first of the raid. Moore ran outside to help and was struck in the thigh by a bullet. Although

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100 Stout, 38.
102 Stout, 39.
103 "Woman Held by Villa for Nine Days...," 2.
104 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 29.
105 Eisenhower, 221.
Wright was exhausted and starving, she remained with Mrs. Moore until help arrived.

Major Frank Tompkins, who had remained at his residence to protect his family during the raid, decided the time had come to join the fight. Within twenty minutes Tompkins had assembled a small mounted troop of about thirty men and took off after the fleeing Villistas. Tompkins stated that 300 yards past the border they engaged the rear flank of the Villistas, reportedly killing some thirty-two enemy troops.

At this point more men from Tompkins' Cavalry Troop H had met up with him as well as Cavalry Troop F under the command of Lieutenant Castleman. Tompkins sent a message to Colonel Slocum, who appeared sometime during the raid, asking if he should continue the pursuit. After a thirty minute wait a reply of "use your own judgment" came to Tompkins.

The American Cavalry Troops F and H pursued the fleeing Villistas for several miles into the Mexican desert. Major Tompkins, realizing that his men were following a force more than twice their size into unfamiliar territory, decided that it would be best to give up their pursuit. Possessing no food or water, little ammunition, and exhausted horses,

106 Tompkins, 55-56.
107 Ibid.
108 Clendennen, Blood on the Border, 206-207.
109 Tompkins, 56.
the Americans slowly made their way back to the smoldering remains of Columbus.\textsuperscript{110}

While the cavalry was out chasing Villa through the desert the townspeople were burying their dead, caring for the wounded, and cleaning up the mess. The bodies of the dead Villistas were stacked like firewood. According to Mary Lee Gaskill, the bodies were soaked with gas and then burned. Children ran about the streets and saw the remains burning as if they were brush piles.\textsuperscript{111} Some of the Villistas were not yet dead when the cleanup crew came upon them. Colonel Slocum is reported to have said "Let them bake in the sun."\textsuperscript{112}

The school teacher came to town to dismiss class and never returned. Many people who lived on farms outside of Columbus were told that the entire town had been destroyed and all the residents killed.\textsuperscript{113} In the center of town, where the worst of the fighting had occurred, lay the smoking remains of the Commercial Hotel. Within its ruins were the badly burned bodies of William Ritchie, John Walker (the honeymooner), and Dr. Hart, a veterinarian from Texas.\textsuperscript{114} This was a fresh reminder of the carnage the raid had caused.

\textsuperscript{110}Stout, 37.
\textsuperscript{111}\textit{The American Experience: The Hunt for Pancho Villa}, 1993, videocassette.
\textsuperscript{112}Braddy, \textit{Pancho Villa At Columbus}, 30.
\textsuperscript{113}\textit{The American Experience: The Hunt for Pancho Villa}, 1993, videocassette.
\textsuperscript{114}Braddy, \textit{Pancho Villa at Columbus}, 29-30.
The aftermath of the raid left eighteen Americans dead and eight more wounded. The Villistas lost more than ninety people who lay scattered from Columbus to three miles over the border. Approximately twenty-two Villistas were taken prisoner, something that Lieutenant Lucas was reprimanded for later. Of those twenty-two only seven or eight stood trial in courts that could hardly be considered fair. Those convicted were executed and denied the ability to appeal.

Villa, himself, escaped from Columbus unscathed, but his troops were defeated. In addition, they lost a large amount of food, small arms and ammunition, and two Benet-Mercier machine guns. Although his men pillaged many goods, they dropped most of them in the desert as they fled from the pursuing cavalrymen. Villa also lost a number of extremely valuable Arabian horses that had been stolen from the United States military, which had been bred for patrolling the desert.

The attack on Columbus, New Mexico was not the vengeful massacre that the newspaper headlines and some historians, made it out to be. On the contrary, the raid was a well

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115 Tompkins, 52-53. Lieutenant Lucas was reprimanded for not having taken enough prisoners. Both Tompkins and Lucas, considering the circumstances, thought the action taken by the military in this matter was not acceptable due to the circumstances.
116 Hurst, 7-8.
117 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 33.
118 Ibid.
119 "Snipers Shoot Down Inhabitants as They Rush from Blazing
timed maneuver which failed to inflict widespread destruction due to the rapid reaction of United States troops. First of all, the damage to the town was limited to just a handful of buildings. These buildings included the two general stores, the Commercial Hotel, the Hover Hotel, the weapons holding area of Camp Furlong, and a food storage facility at the garrison. One of the general stores and the Commercial hotel were owned by Sam Ravel, the same merchant who had dealt with the Villistas before.

It is important to note that the raiders did not disturb any of the private residences of the town. Their main focus was on the stores and the supply areas for the goods that they contained. Villa and his men did attack the Commercial Hotel. This was an intentional maneuver to rob the wealthier patrons of their valuables and find Ravel. Moreover, the majority of the women and children encountered by the Villistas were left unmolested. Tragically, there was a pregnant woman killed during the commotion while running through the main street. Several civilian and military men lost their lives as well.

The evidence clearly shows that the driving passion of the Villistas was their dire need of money, clothes, arms, ammunition, food, and horses. The money and clothes came

120 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 31-32.
121 There is some dispute as to whether Mrs. Moore was raped. The author has not been able to prove this occurred.
122 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 29.
from Sam Ravel's establishments whereas the arms, ammunition, food, and horses all came courtesy of the United States Military. The limited scope of the Villistas proves that Villa did not intend to massacre Americans. Had a civilian massacre been the objective, the Villistas could have easily wiped out the population of Columbus.

The town of Columbus, New Mexico in 1916 was an isolated and sparsely guarded, yet, well supplied, cluster of adobe huts and a few wooden structures. The nearest town of any size, Deming, was more than thirty miles away. However, it was exactly this combination of ample supplies and isolation that made Columbus "the plum of the New Mexico desert that lay susceptible to a surprise attack ripe for the plucking by hungering guerrillas." In other words, Villa, although terribly brutal, attacked Columbus out of necessity and convenience, not out of a thirst for revenge.

In response to the attack on U.S. soil, President Woodrow Wilson announced on March 11, 1916 that an adequate force would be sent into Mexico with the single objective of capturing Villa and bringing him to justice. Wilson then placed an expeditionary force of 5,000 troops under the command of General John J. Pershing. General Pershing and his Punitive Expedition chased Villa and his men for

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123 Stout, 31.
124 Braddy, Pancho Villa at Columbus, 36.
126 Katz, 567.
nine months through the varying terrain of Mexico without ever catching a glimpse of Villa.

Villa continued to be a thorn in the side of the Mexican government that had been taken over by his arch-rival, Alvaro Obregón. In 1920, Villa retired from his hell-raising ways after receiving a settlement from the government that included a 25,000 acre hacienda in Durango, Chihuahua and an annual income of 500,000 pesos.\textsuperscript{127} However, Villa's peaceful retirement was unexpectedly interrupted.

On July 23, 1923, Villa and several bodyguards were riding in his Dodge convertible on their way to Parral, Chihuahua when eight unidentified men ambushed the car and poured bullets into it.\textsuperscript{128} It has long been speculated that Obregón was behind the assassination.\textsuperscript{129} Regardless of who was to blame, death came to Villa in the same violent manner he lived his life, by the gun.

\textsuperscript{127} Eisenhower, 322.
\textsuperscript{129} Eisenhower, 325.
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