Mexico and the Foreign Policy of Napoleon III

Michele Cunningham

Thesis presented as requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History, University of Adelaide

December 1996
## Contents

*Abstract*  

*Statement*  

*Acknowledgements*  

*Abbreviations*  

*Introduction*  

**Chapter 1** Calls for Intervention  

**Chapter 2** Aims of the Intervention  

**Chapter 3** The Venture Underway  

**Chapter 4** A Life of its Own  

**Chapter 5** Our Honour Engaged  

**Chapter 6** Duplicity Revealed  

**Chapter 7** The Empire Does Mean Peace  

**Chapter 8** La Grande Pensée de la Règne?  

**Conclusion**  

*Bibliography*  

*Index of Names*
Abstract

The French intervention in Mexico between 1862 and 1867, undertaken initially in conjunction with England and Spain, has challenged historians, as it did contemporaries, who have sought to understand and explain why Napoleon became involved in what many saw as a hopeless cause. A number of conclusions have been reached, ranging from France’s need to find resources such as silver and cotton, to Napoleon’s determination to establish a Latin, Catholic, monarchical bloc to the further encroachment of the United States into Central and South America. While each of these theories contains an element of truth, they can be challenged because the analyses have not gone far enough. Many historians have seen the imposing of a Latin Catholic bloc as “the grand idea” (la grande pensée) of the Emperor, some claiming it failed because of the ineptitude of its author, and others because Napoleon was a Utopian dreamer out of touch with reality. But such an act would have been contrary to his policy.

No one previously has attempted to ascertain whether there is some thread of consistency between Napoleon’s approach to the Mexican question and to other foreign issues during his reign. This thesis seeks to redress that gap in the historiography by analysing the basis of Napoleon’s foreign policy, and by placing the Mexican venture within the context of that policy. Developed from the political writings of his youth, his policy will be seen to embrace a world view that few of his contemporaries were able to comprehend or appreciate until after his death. In the case of his foreign contemporaries, their views were always tinged with fear and suspicion that he intended to subjugate Europe as his uncle had done. Neither have historians accepted his world view in the spirit in which it was intended, which was to establish a basis for peace. Instead, many have dismissed it as the ruminations of a dreamer. Napoleon’s policy towards Mexico was consistent with his policy in Europe, and the significance of this conclusion is that it shows, despite claims to the contrary, that he did have a foreign policy, and was not merely the naïve opportunist his critics saw him to be.