In the historical literature on twentieth-century Mexico, the early 1940s have received relatively little attention. Scholars have tended to focus instead on the late 1930s, when the populist administration of Lázaro Cárdenas launched a massive agrarian reform program and nationalized the oil industry, and on the latter part of the 1940s, when the government of Miguel Alemán made a clear turn towards the right, favoring large industrial interests and severely limiting the independence of labor unions. Between Cárdenas and Alemán, the man who governed Mexico from 1940 to 1946, Manuel Avila Camacho, has been portrayed as bland, colorless, and weak, and the years of his administration have been described in vague terms as a transitional period between the more dramatic stages of Mexican history that came before and after. This dissertation provides a more detailed look at the important transitions that were underway in Mexican politics during the first half of the 1940s, concluding that Avila Camacho played a far more important role than has previously been acknowledged in the consolidation of the single-party system that functioned effectively in Mexico for the rest of the twentieth century.

My dissertation shows that the key to the success that Avila Camacho had in strengthening the Mexican state and enhancing the powers of the presidency was the fact that World War II created an atmosphere of international crisis during his years in office. The war allowed the president to insist upon a policy of “national unity” that served to suppress factional infighting within the official party and to limit the political options available to opposition groups. The national unity policy also contributed to an improvement in official relations with the Church, while efforts to prepare the Mexican armed forces for the challenges of modern warfare facilitated the creation of a more professional, less political army. Moreover, the war also made it possible for Mexico to repair its frayed ties with major powers such as the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union; the Avila Camacho administration took full advantage of this opportunity, often finding ways to gain valuable benefits for Mexico in its dealings with Washington and other governments. Mexico’s leaders did not always find it easy to convince their compatriots that the country had a significant role to play in the global conflagration, but by appealing to Mexicans’ nationalism and patriotism, and by bringing the country into the war gradually, Avila Camacho was able to wield the power of a wartime president without triggering insurmountable opposition from those of his countrymen who were at best ambivalent about Mexican participation in the conflict. All of these developments played a key role in the emergence of a more conservative, more institutionalized Mexican state in the post-war period.

The dissertation details the impact of the Second World War on Mexican politics through a narrative of the period between Avila Camacho’s inauguration in 1940 and the end of the war in 1945. Chapter One notes the precariousness of the president’s political position during his first year in office and describes the shrewd way in which his administration capitalized on the international situation to win support for itself during those difficult months. Chapter Two outlines the Mexican government’s response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, while Chapter Three explains how Avila Camacho was able to lead a reluctant nation into a formal state of war in May 1942, after German U-boats sank two Mexican tankers. Chapter Four describes the administration’s efforts to rally the nation around it during Mexico’s first full year as a belligerent, and Chapter Five details the government’s cautious steps towards direct military participation in the war. The sixth and final chapter reviews the final year of the war, when a largely symbolic Mexican fighter squadron saw action in the Pacific Theater, just as political maneuvering in advance of the 1946 presidential elections began in earnest at home. Finally, the conclusion reviews the critical role played by events many thousands of miles from Mexican shores in the political transformation engineered by Avila Camacho during the early 1940s.