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The middle men : the American Foreign Service and the dictators of Central America, 1930-1952

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Chapter 6

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE... The alliance against fascism, 1939-1943

The world's biggest dictator is America's Best Neighbor between here and the Rio Grande. The million people and the resources of the 46,332 square miles of Honduras are behind the United States in peace or war, and the efforts of the totalitarian states to undermine the influence of America run up here against the most formidable physical obstacle to be found anywhere on earth. (...) General Tiburcio Carias Andino, President of Honduras (...) is a third again larger than Stalin, twice the size of Hitler, and would make three of Mussolini.

~ Hubert R. Knickerbocker, 1939 ¹

After the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the Central American caudillos were adopted in a hemisphere-wide, and later worldwide, alliance led by the United States. Initially, the hemispheric alliance was aimed at keeping the Americas out of the war. After Pearl Harbor, the new worldwide alliance that came to be known as the United Nations was aimed at defeating fascism. Whatever its aim or reach, though, the alliance that formed under U.S. leadership was conceived of as a league of freedom-loving countries, democracies even, who jointly faced the evil of totalitarianism.

The alliance was considerably more diverse than the symbolism of “the democracies vs. the dictatorships” would permit, however. And its commitment to the ideal of democracy was, at best, pragmatic. Of the Big Three—the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union—one was an outright dictatorship, while the other two were, during the War at least, colonial empires. Hence, some subtle—and not so subtle—artifices were needed to force the alliance partners into the mold of democracy. In the United States, for example, Joseph Stalin, the notorious mastermind of the show trials and a former ally of Hitler, was re-imagined as “Uncle Joe”, a benign patriarch for the Russian people.²

Similarly, the caudillos of the American hemisphere were re-imagined in the United States as staunch, if somewhat eclectic, defenders of democracy. As Knickerbocker's

¹ Knickerbocker, Manuscript of Article, February 23, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, 800: Honduras.

² Alpers, *Dictators*, 220-249.

prosaic description of Cárías indicates, the caudillos were never conceived of as anything other than dictators—that would have required outright denial of the facts. But together with his formidable bulk (weighing in at 250 pounds), the journalist considered Cárías' firm hold on power to be an obstacle against the spread of fascist influence in the Western Hemisphere. The sins of the Central American dictators were absolved after the start of the War, because they became allies in the fight against the even more vicious tyranny of fascism.

1. WARTIME COOPERATION REVISITED

United States policy toward Central America during the Second World War has received scant attention in the historiography. As far as the history of the War is concerned, Central America was not, of course, a very interesting theatre. This might have been different if a real threat against the Panama Canal had developed; if German submarines had attacked the isthmian shores; or if the large German colonies in the region had developed into a fifth column movement. Even though fear for such events was very real during the earlier phases of the War, nothing came of it and Central America remained free from external threats.

Washington had no policy aimed specifically at Central American during the War. Its plans for the region were part of a larger hemispheric policy, which was itself part of a larger strategy to fight the War and, roughly from 1943 onward, to shape the postwar world. United States hemispheric policy as it concerned Central America was a strange mixture of feverish activity and negligence. The activity sprang entirely from the multifaceted efforts to win the War. Meanwhile, Washington also neglected the region in the sense that matters not related to the War, matters that had no significance beyond the strictly Central American context, received no attention. There was only wartime policy and Central America played an (infinitely) small role in that policy, but there was no Central American policy as such.³

In the absence of a Central American policy, or Latin American policy for that matter, historians have found little to write about where the World War period is concerned. Bryce Wood's classic, two volume account of the rise and decline of the Good Neighbor policy, for example, almost entirely ignores the War. The first book ends in 1939 with the observation that "[j]ust before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (...) it may be said that the United States had established, with the assistance of certain Latin American states, an unprecedented set of relationships productive of a nearly solidary American attitude toward threats from without". Especially as compared to inter-American cooperation during World War I and the later Korean War, the support that the United States received from its Latin American allies was, according to Wood, the

³ A brief overview of State Department wartime programs can be found in: Findling, *Close Neighbors*, chapter 5. For military programs, see: Child, *Unequal Alliance*, 27-62. For cultural programs, see: Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas*, 35-61. For local economic developments and the role of U.S. war-related economic measures therein, see: Bulmer-Thomas, *Political Economy*, 87-100.

greatest triumph for the Good Neighbor. Wood's second monograph, this time on the decline of the Good Neighbor, picks up the story in 1944, with Braden's attempts to block the rise of Perón in Argentina in 1944.⁴ One would get the impression that nothing had happened in the meantime.

Many later books on U.S. inter-American policy offer a similar perspective on the war years—i.e. that they represent nothing more than an afterthought to the Good Neighbor policy and a prelude to the Cold War.⁵ Those who present a more critical view of the Good Neighbor, such as the proponents of a "Somoza solution" interpretation, adopt a similar timeline, but are, of course, less enthusiastic than Wood is about the nature of wartime cooperation. According to Lars Schoultz, for example, the Good Neighbor was merely a cosmetic cover for the promotion of self-seeking economic and strategic interests. The War was another extension of this tendency, with the external threat serving as a justification for the attainment of more bases and raw materials in exchange for lend-lease weapons. The War only made it easier for Washington to strengthen its ties to the military regimes that had kept order in its backyard since the early thirties. The U.S. unconditionally supported the dictatorships in the interest of local stability and the dictatorships unconditionally supported the U.S. in order to be illegible for lend-lease aid, flexible trade and financial agreements, and prestigious United Nations status. After the War, the strong bonds with local military regimes "would facilitate the transmission of anticommunist values to Latin America", according to Schoultz.⁶ Thus, the War was a bridge between the 1930s and the Cold War, but not a period of inherent interest.

The theme that Schoultz describes—the continuity between U.S. imperialist policy in Latin America during the first half of the century and its ruthless Cold War policy during the second half of the twentieth century—has been popular in the historiography for a while, but, remarkably, did not lead to an upsurge of interest in the connecting years of the War. Rather, the events of the Cold War proper provoked an interest in what has been called the "first Cold War" in Latin America: The convergence of North and South American elitist, anticommunist ideologies in the wake of the Mexican and Bolshevik revolutions and the concurrent attempt to "contain" social changes in the Latin republics.⁷ The Somoza solution interpretation fits this narrative particularly well, as it appears to foreshadow U.S. support for Latin American dictators during the Cold War itself. The intervening World War period, with its emphasis on external threats, seems nothing but a brief departure from this general trend of containment of internal social forces. In this context, Andrew Crawley recently observed a tendency in the early historiography of U.S.-Central American relations to combine "what was known of the pre-1930 era" with "what was known of the post-1945 period" and to make some

⁴ Wood, *The Making*, 334-361; Idem, *The Dismantling*, ix-xiv.

⁵ Gilderhus discusses to this trend: Gilderhus, *The Second Century*, 91-96.

⁶ Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 309-315. Similar arguments can be found in: Schmitz, *Talons of the Eagle*, chapter 3; Coatsworth, *The Clients and the Colossus*, 45-48.

⁷ Gould, in: Grandin and Joseph, *A Century of Revolution*.

“intuitive leaps” for the period in between.⁸ The current chapter seeks to fill in those gaps in the historiography, at least as far as the day-to-day diplomatic relations between the United States and the Central American states are concerned.

2. WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

An old truism about Americans is that they tend to have a simplistic, dualistic view of the world, dividing it into friends and foes; black and white; good and evil.⁹ The freedom/tyranny divide is a familiar example that instructed popular conceptions of both World Wars and the Cold War.¹⁰ It is certainly true that during the Second World War, all those fighting fascism on the American side were considered part of the “free world”, including the dictatorships of Central America. One can be cynical about America’s “easy” acceptance of dictatorial allies during the War. Yet, there was nothing particularly easy about it. At least in the eyes of contemporaries, the war against fascism was the biggest challenge that civilization had ever faced. Any discussion of America’s wartime cooperation with the Central American dictators, therefore, should stress that it was accompanied with doubts and ambiguities on the American side—even if these were eventually put aside in the interest of the larger goal of defeating fascism.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment during the Second World War was an enormous organization and to claim that everyone working within that establishment had a simple, dualistic view of the world would not do justice to the rich variety of competing voices and viewpoints that, in reality, informed U.S. foreign policy. In fact, an undercurrent of ambivalence about America’s dictatorial allies was noticeable in the State Department and the Foreign Service throughout the war years. Among the American legations in Central America, that undercurrent was most clearly in evidence, somewhat ironically, at Frazer’s post.

Before the War, Frazer remained untouched by concerns voiced in the American press and among his colleagues in the Foreign Service that the dictators of Central sympathized with fascism. When, in December 1940, a Spanish informer in Nicaragua told the American minister there that Martínez was “with” the Nazis and that the latter had gleefully predicted that when Germany won the War he would have the pleasure of hanging 50 Americans and of “eating their fried testicles”, Frazer countered that: “I know President Martínez very well and admire him greatly, not only as the ablest administrator and president this country ever had, but [also] because of his scrupulous honesty and

⁸ Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt*, 3

⁹ Bratzel argues, for example, that the United States had a dualistic view of the war as between good and evil. This tendency writes Bratzel, also extended to Latin American policy during the war: Cooperating countries became close allies while uncooperative countries were seen almost as traitors. See: Bratzel, “Introduction”, in: Leonard and Bratzel eds., *Latin America during the Second World War* (2007) 1-16, there 1-2 and 8; Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 82-84.

¹⁰ Alpers, *Dictators*, 188-302; Purcell, *Crisis*, 233-272.

fair dealing”.¹¹ During the year following, however, Frazer experienced a profound crisis of confidence in the Martínez regime.

In September 1941, the minister admitted that although “the Legation is loath to alter the favorable opinion it has long held as to the sincerity of President Martínez’ continually expressed pro-democratic sympathies” there were certain aspects of the regime that raised legitimate doubts on this count and “it should be reported that an already considerable, and it would appear growing number of responsible people here certainly do harbor this doubt [about Martínez’ pro-democratic sympathies]”.¹² In October, Frazer reported the prevalence of government actions “of a more or less totalitarian character”.¹³ In December, days after Salvador’s declaration of war, Frazer announced that the Martínez government was developing from a “liberal dictatorship” to an out-and-out “totalitarian government”. At that point, the minister admitted, the President’s good qualities—his honesty, progressivism, and social programs—only just outweighed his bad qualities.¹⁴

What might explain Frazer’s doubts about Martínez, which, it will be noted, developed at a time when his colleagues in Guatemala and Honduras had just left similar qualms behind them? The minister in El Salvador was not unusually sensitive to signs of political abuse, otherwise he would have raised his doubts at the time of Martínez’ 1939 “reelection” campaign. Nor could the minister count on the sympathy and understanding of his colleagues and superiors, who, by this time, were only interested to hear about the unbreakable ties of inter-American solidarity in the face of totalitarian aggression. Actually, it was a belated local reaction to the *continuismo* campaign, played out in the context of El Salvador’s unique political culture, that opened Frazer’s eyes to the reality of Martínez’ repressive tactics.

Traditionally, Salvadorans considered themselves more civic-minded than the people of neighboring Central American republics and they valued the strength and endurance of constitutional rule in their country. Compared to its supposedly volatile and dictator-ridden neighbors, El Salvador seemed stable and progressive. Looking down upon Guatemalans and Hondurans, the people of El Salvador felt a stronger bond with liberal Costa Rica—which partially explains why Costa Rica was the first to recognize the Martínez government. So when Martínez, after repeated promises to the contrary,

¹¹ Meredith Nicholson (U.S. Minister to Nicaragua) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1355, December 23, 1940, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Military Activities; Frazer to Col. J.B. Pate (U.S. Military Attaché to Costa Rica), January 14, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 3, cl. 121: Diplomatic Branch. General; Frazer to Capt. Frank M. June (U.S. Naval Attaché to Guatemala), January 14, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 3, cl. 121: Diplomatic Branch. General; Frazer to Nicholson, January 14, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 3, cl. 121: Diplomatic Branch. General.

¹² Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1673, September 4, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Non-American Activities.

¹³ Secretary of State to Frazer, Despatch 464, October 8, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 801: Government; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1777, October 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 801: Government.

¹⁴ Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1786, December 20, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

changed the constitution to continue himself in office, in imitation of Ubico and Cárías, many Salvadorans were deeply indignant. A considerable number of government employees, from the lowest rungs to the cabinet level and including many conservative aristocrats, quit their jobs in protest against *continuismo*. Several of them told the American minister that they still admired Martínez personally and supported many of his policies, but refused to work for an unconstitutional government.¹⁵

There were no alternative political parties that those who deserted Martínez after 1939 could turn to. Despite its purported progressivism, a stable system of political parties had never developed in El Salvador. Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua had their traditional two-party system of Liberals and Conservatives—even if that system fell apart as a result of the rise of the caudillos—but in El Salvador, political parties had always been *ad hoc*: Organizing around a leader when presidential elections were due and mostly dissolving shortly after elections. Martínez broke with this tradition, in a way, by founding and sustaining his own political party, the *Partido Pro Patria*, after his rise to power. In fact, however, the party was more of a traditional patron-client system than a political organization and served as a solid power base for the President. Concurrently, *Pro Patria* was the only legal party in El Salvador: There was no opposition party, “loyal”, exiled, or otherwise.¹⁶

But much like in the Honduran case, where the exiled Liberal Party tried to capture the banner of “democracy” in the late 1930s, the ideological battle with fascism offered opportunities for disgruntled Salvadorans to express their concerns. In September, 1941, two new organizations were founded: The *Acción Democrática Salvadoreña* (ADS) and the *Juventud Democrática Salvadoreña* (JDS)¹⁷—the first made up of former government employees and professionals, the second of young, idealistic writers. Formally, these were not political parties, but civic organizations that wished to express their sympathy with the Allies by promoting democratic ideals and counteracting the spread of totalitarian ideas.¹⁸ The regime was not duped, however: Shortly after the founding of said organizations, Foreign Minister Araujo visited minister Frazer to warn him that ADS and JDS were in fact anti-government parties and therefore, naturally, communistic and pro-Nazi. The Martínez government was somewhat embarrassed by the situation because it was on record as promoting democracy and opposing totalitarianism itself, but, argued the President and the Foreign Minister, the present world crisis required unity and patriotism in the face of threats: If the members of ADS and JDS were *genuinely* interested in the defense of democracy, they could join *Pro Patria*. The fact that they did

¹⁵ Parkman, *Nonviolent insurrection*, 4-8 and Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 444, January 19, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 21, Vol. VII, cl. 800: Political Affairs II.

¹⁶ Ching, “Patronage and politics”, 50-70,

¹⁷ Respectively: *Salvadoran Democratic Action* and *Salvadoran Democratic Youth*.

¹⁸ Francisci Lime to Frazer, September 19, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1715, September 22, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica.

not proved that they were only interested in creating division.¹⁹ Some weeks later, ADS and JDS were outlawed.²⁰

The American legation had witnessed opposition to the Martínez regime before, most notably in 1932 when thousands of peasants revolted, but these episodes had generally been disregarded as being purely local affairs. This time it was different: The members of ADS and JDS were not peasants, professional politicians, or disgruntled army officers, but former government officials, physicians, lawyers, and professors—in a word, close friends and acquaintances of the legation.²¹ Moreover, in the parlance of democracy, the new organizations found a theme that related both to traditional Salvadoran civic culture and the interests of its middle class supporters and to American war-time idealism.²² Toward the end of September, 1941, Frazer reported to the Department that it was ridiculous to characterize ADS as communist or pro-Nazi, as the local government did, because its members were “all prominent, conservative and patriotic. Most of them are known to have resigned office because, although formerly in full accord with the President [Martínez], they disagree with the extension of his presidential term and his continuation of a de facto dictatorship”.²³ When, in October, the government formally restricted the right of assembly and presented this as a measure to deal with enemy activities, Frazer reported that the decree was obviously directed at “legitimate” opposition such as that of ADS and that it was enacted “in spite of President Martínez’ reiterated statements of his believe in and support for democracy”.²⁴

Notwithstanding Frazer’s special reports on the suppression of ADS and his concurrent suspicion that the Martínez regime was showing a tendency toward totalitarian practices, only the middle level of the Department demonstrated a passing

¹⁹ Frazer, Memorandum on Visits by Drs Araujo and Avila re New Democratic Parties, September 23, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1720, September 24, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1727, September 24, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica.

²⁰ Interestingly, James Dunkerley claims that Martínez made it a crime to express support for the Allied cause. According to him, this proves that Martínez sympathized with the Axis and, by implication, makes American war-time support of his regime all the more cynical. It is probable that Dunkerley refers to events such as the suppression of ADS and JDS, but, as should be clear from the foregoing, these organizations were concerned with local affairs and their suppression was also a matter of local politics. The American legation was fully aware of this fact. See: Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 33.

²¹ One year earlier a comparable “Central American Democratic Party” was founded, but the legation concluded on that occasion that it was made up of unimportant people without influence. Its leader was described as a “dark” and “cheaply dressed” man who appeared to be “rather a crackpot”. The legation basically ignored the existence of the party. Gerhard Gade (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1158, October 18, 1940, PR El Salvador, Box 32, cl. 800: Political Affairs; Frazer, Memorandum of Conversation with Florencio Calderón, November 25, 1940, PR El Salvador, Box 32, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

²² Weaver, *Inside the volcano*.

²³ Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1720, September 24, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica.

²⁴ Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1740, October 3, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica.

interest in the matter.²⁵ The suppression of ADS almost coincided with America's formal engagement in the War. When former members of the, now illegal, ADS visited Frazer at the legation on December 18, only 11 days after Pearl Harbor, the minister could not help but sympathize with those "sincere men of high ideals, actuated by unselfish, patriotic motives". They left a manifesto with the minister that expounded their ideals, perhaps in a last effort to involve the Americans in their conflict with the regime. Writing his report on the meeting that evening, Frazer regretfully noted that there was nothing more he could do to help, since the Department had already been notified about the situation but, under the circumstances, could not act "without indulging in improper criticism of President Martínez' administration". "This memorandum, therefore, is being filed merely to complete the records".²⁶

To argue that American foreign policy establishment simply held a dualistic view of the world is to oversimplify matters. It might be said that the State Department as a whole was temporarily too involved in the execution of wartime measures to be bothered by the idea that it was cooperating with Latin American dictators to fight European dictators, but there was definitely an undercurrent of moral ambiguity about this situation. This undercurrent came to the surface toward the end of the War, as the acute threat to the American continent passed and the State Department briefly turned against its former dictatorial allies. But this was still in the future. Around 1941, people like Frazer had no choice but to put their doubts aside—or, at most, on file—and work with the caudillos. It was the stresses of total war that forced a close alliance upon the Americans and the Central Americans, regardless of any *mutual* dislike for each other's political culture (Ubico, it should be remembered, was suspicious of the New Deal's "communistic" tendencies).

Wartime cooperation was to leave its own marks on the thinking of the Foreign Service, however. It turned out that the caudillos were able to provide quick and supposedly effective cooperation in the fight against the Nazi danger. There were no courts or legislatures to deal with: One man could commit his country to a new treaty or introduce measures to suppress subversive elements. And so, the historical experience of wartime cooperation would produce two competing modes of thought about the cooperation with local regimes: One was a deep sense of ambiguity about U.S. association with dictatorships; the other was that the caudillos proved effective allies against an external, totalitarian threat. In Central America, the latter mode of thinking would be represented by Erwin, who, despite his pre-war criticism of Carías, became the regime's staunchest supporter after the War. Both ideas would profoundly influence post-war developments.

²⁵ Secretary of State to Frazer, Instruction 464, October 8, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 4, cl. 800: Government; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despach 1777, October 16, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 4, cl. 801: Government.

²⁶ Frazer, Memorandum on Call at Legation of Dr. Francisco A. Lima and six other members of the Central American Committee of the Acción Democrática Salvadoreña, December 18, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: Accion Democratica.

2.1 *Friends on paper. The diplomat's war.*

The State Department was mainly concerned with the political side of the War—the “war on paper” if you will. Inter-American cooperation and coordination had always been important objectives of the Good Neighbor policy and was put to good use throughout the international crises that the Roosevelt administration faced. Reciprocal trade treaties were pushed as a remedy against the Depression; neutrality policy was coordinated at inter-American conferences; and the American Republics were all recruited into the allied camp during the War. Interestingly, material benefits were not always expected from inter-American cooperation. Individual reciprocal trade agreements did not always yield beneficial economic results and most American Republics were not thought capable to protect their neutrality or to contribute to the war effort in the military sense. For an important part—and this is particularly true where U.S.-Central American relations are concerned—the benefits of inter-American cooperation were political in nature. The ability of the United States to mould a regional block in favor of its policies of either “free trade”, “peace”, or “democracy” (as was the case with reciprocal trade, neutrality, and war respectively) reflected on its ability and stature as a world leader.²⁷

Where Central America was concerned, the State Department never expected substantial material benefits in the cases of reciprocal trade, neutrality, or war. The economies of the United States and Central America were non-competitive, so there were generally no tariffs or trade barriers against coffee and bananas in the United States, neither were there trade barriers against manufactured products in Central America—yet, reciprocal trade agreements were duly negotiated. The Central American states had no important political ties with either Europe or Asia—yet they duly followed U.S. neutrality policy. Lastly, no one in the Roosevelt administration expected the isthmian republics to contribute to the war in a traditional military sense. For example, Secretary of the Army Stimson noted after a dinner with representatives of Latin American armies that “when I saw the swarthy faces of some of the representatives of countries like Honduras who sat in front of me at this table, I ‘had me doubts’, so to speak, as to how much they would take of this burden [of military cooperation]”.²⁸ Regardless of the overtly racist argument of Stimson, Washington’s skepticism about the war-making potential of a country like Honduras was solidly realistic. Yet the political—or “moral” as it was sometimes called—support of Central American states for the war effort was aggressively sought and greatly appreciated when forthcoming.

The caudillos actively supported U.S. international initiatives before the start of the European war, this trend continued at an accelerated pace after 1939. Events in Europe set in motion the machinery of inter-American cooperation that was created at pre-war conferences and the Department aggressively pushed the sister republics to toe the line. During the first half of 1941, the Department considered measures to “motivate” the Latin American republics to take a more aggressive stance against totalitarian actions. At that point, a position of strict neutrality, which was still the position taken by the major Latin

²⁷ Also see chapters 4 and 5 for these policies.

²⁸ Quoted in Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 314.

nations, was no longer considered adequate by the Department. The benefits of Lend-Lease and “sympathetic” consideration of export licenses were dangled before the southern governments to make them go along with the U.S.²⁹ No such actions were needed in Central America—its leaders apparently being well-aware of the U.S. ability to wield stick and offer carrot. In many cases, Central American governments offered their help even before it was solicited. Ubico, Martínez, and Carías explicitly told the American ambassadors in their capitals that they would follow the U.S. into war (if necessary) at some point before Pearl Harbor.³⁰ Those promises were kept alive in the official press and resulted in the spontaneous declarations of war in December—those of Honduras and El Salvador actually preceding the official American declaration of war against Japan by a couple of hours.³¹

A brief overview of diplomatic actions around the start of the Second World War serves to illustrate the nature of cooperation sought by the United States and provided by Central America. In the second half of 1939, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras proclaimed their neutrality, following U.S. wishes. One month later, the Department requested that American nations jointly condemn the *Graf Spee* incident off the Uruguayan coast—Central American states concurred. On December 22 of that year, the Department requested blanket permission for the use of Central American waters, airspace, and airfields for the purpose of a “neutrality patrol”. The request was quickly granted. In May 1940, the Central American states joined the U.S. in condemnation of the Nazi invasion of the Low Countries and provided maximum press attention to the event at the request of the Department. During the summer of that year, the U.S. and Central America agreed, at Washington’s initiative, to coordinate their actions against Axis propaganda and started to exchange information on that subject. Around the same time, the State Department brought together representatives from the War Department and the Central American armies to hold preliminary talks on defensive cooperation. Carías’ assertion that he expected nothing in return for his complete cooperation particularly impressed the War Department.

Naturally, 1941 saw another scurry of diplomatic activity. The Department actively sought Latin American approval for a set of plans and strategies called the “Defense of Democracies”, that was introduced to Congress and to the sister republics at the Montevideo Conference. Central American states applauded the initiative. The isthmian

²⁹ Bonsal to Welles, March 14, 1941, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 4, Folder marked March to April, 1941.

³⁰ Frazer, Memorandum on Call upon President Martinez, November 26, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 4, Vol. 3, cl. 800: Political Affairs; Salter to the Secretary of State, Despatch 822, October 3, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 2, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1447, July 8, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 71, Vol. XII, cl. 845: Etiquette; Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 634, July 9, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: Guatemala; Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, June 21, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 3, cl. 711: War. Peace. Friendship. Alliance; Hartwell Johnson (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, August 14, 1941, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

³¹ Cabot, Memorandum on Central America, General, January 9, 1942, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 6, Folder marked January to February, 1942.

states also extended their “moral” support for the occupation of Iceland and the European possessions in Latin America. Closer cooperation toward the suppression of “totalitarian activities” was achieved when the Central Americans agreed to keep a check on Axis diplomatic activity, communications, and travel. The alliance between Central America and the United States—which might be said to have existed *de facto* for some time—became official with the isthmian declarations of war against the Axis. Toward the end of 1941, beginning of 1942, Guatemala, Salvador, and Honduras signed the Atlantic Charter.³²

Wartime cooperation made great demands on the U.S. Foreign Service, even on those officers in the tiny Central American republics. During the 1940-1945 years, the U.S. legations in Central America were expanded to be able to deal with the vast amounts of work relating to the War.³³ But this process was accompanied by considerable confusion, especially in the 1941 to 1943 period when the workload for legations rose very quickly

³² For brevities sake, only the files of the legation in Honduras will be quoted here: Erwin to the Department of State, Despatch 863, November 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, December 15, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 56, December 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, December 15, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 57, December 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 910, December 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Welles to Erwin, Instruction 221, December 22, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Department of State to Erwin, Telegram 6, April 14, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 800: Germany; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 654, April 18, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 800: Germany; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, June 27, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 49, cl. 824: Equipment and Supplies; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 21, November 7, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 49, cl. 824: Equipment and Supplies; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, July 29, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 49, cl. 824: Equipment and Supplies; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, May, 1940, PR Honduras, Box 57, cl. 711.1: Joint Declaration; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, June 3, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, cl. 711: Staff Conference; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 30, June 4, 1940; PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, cl. 711: Staff Conference; Department of State to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, January 16, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 5, February 3, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1437, July 1, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1455, July 14, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 110, December 8, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1703, December 12, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Hull to Erwin, Paraphrase of Department Telegram 105, December 31, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 140, December 31, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 67, cl. 711: Declaration of War Paraphrase of Telegram 90 from the Department dated December 13, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 2, cl. 820: Military Affairs; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 129, December 18, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 2, cl. 820: Military Affairs.

³³ Also consult the figures in chapter 1.

while new personnel was not readily available. Already in September 1939, John Cabot, first secretary at the legation in Guatemala, wrote his friend Gerald Drew at the State Department that the legation was cutting back on routine reports and reports on political matters because the Department was probably being “swamped” by other matters anyway, but also because the legation was short on clerks.³⁴ What had been a friendly reminder of a shortness of personnel in September became a desperate plea for help in July, 1940: In an official report to the Department, Cabot noted that “the work of this Legation has substantially doubled in the past year” while the “personnel of the Legation has not been expanded to handle this increase in business”. The situation became so serious that:

“...matters have now reached the point where it is impossible to conduct the Legation’s business as it should be conducted. Important matters requiring detailed study can not be given the time which should be devoted to them. Less important matters must be slighted in order that more important matters may receive attention. The most serious difficulty which the Legation faces, however, is the fact that so many matters which it handles must be done by or at a certain time. When, as frequently happens, a number of these urgent matters must be handled simultaneously the small Legation staff is utterly swamped, and it is very difficult for both the officers and clerks to avoid slipshod work. I do not need to point out that under such circumstances serious errors might readily be made. Moreover, no margin exists for the handling of a possible real emergency on top of the Legation’s regular business.”

To compound these difficulties, several people at the legation were showing physical signs of exhaustion due to the workload and lack of leave: Two officers (probably Des Portes and Cabot) were suffering from chronic stomach problems that, in Cabot’s view, were in part caused by “the constant strain of work”. If this situation continued, the secretary opined, there was the very real risk that “the Legation’s business would be forced virtually to stop” or that one or more members of the staff would “suffer a complete breakdown”.³⁵

The situation at other legations in Central America was substantially the same. Beginning in 1941, Frazer reported that all his clerks were overworked and urgently asked for more personnel, both at the clerical and officer level. In the following two years, every new addition to the personnel of the legation in El Salvador was only followed by more urgent appeals for more people because the workload kept increasing.³⁶ Similarly,

³⁴ Cabot to Drew, September 29, 1938, PR Guatemala, Box 20, cl. 123: Cabot.

³⁵ Cabot to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1372, July 19, 1940, PR Guatemala, Box 26, cl. 121: Diplomatic Branch.

³⁶ Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1333, February 27, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to G. Howland Shaw (Assistant Secretary of State), May 19, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1640, August 16, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Shaw to Frazer, Instruction 438, September 2, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Telegram 100, December 4, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Hull to Gade, Telegram 155, December 9, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Telegram 113, December 11, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Hull to Frazer,

Erwin started pleading for more personnel in 1941. Halfway through 1942, the minister reported that his legation was operating with a minimum of employees. The clerks were overworked and, most damningly, the “minister [was] doing at least half his own typing”.³⁷

Even if the Department sympathized with dire situation at its Central American posts, which was not always the case³⁸, it was low on personnel itself³⁹ and devoted most of its attention to other parts of the world. It was slow to react to the shortness of personnel in its relatively unimportant Central American posts. From 1941 onward, the legations did welcome several new colleagues: Officers, clerks, and specialist who were send to work on war-related projects. However, it appears that the increase in personnel did not keep up with the increasing workload. Requests for extra personnel from the field continued until at least 1943.⁴⁰

December 17, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Telegram 132, December 23, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Hull to Frazer, Telegram 179, December 23, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to Secretary of State, Telegram 137, December 27, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 38, cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1252, January 7, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 40, cl. 124.66: Conduct of Office; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1590, July 21, 1941, Box 40, cl. 124.66: Conduct of Office; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2642, June 30, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 56, Cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-29, July 28, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 56, Cl. 123: General; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Telegram 210, July 28, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 56, Cl. 123: General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-153, December 10, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 56, Cl. 123: General.

³⁷ Albert H. Cousins (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, January 3, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 64, cl. 124.66 Records and Correspondence; Cousins to the Secretary of State, July 8, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 64, cl. 124.66 Records and Correspondence; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1762, January 7, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 123: Cousins; Erwin to the Secretary of State, telegram 50, February 25, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 123: Mendez; Erwin to the Division of Foreign Service Personnel, July 31, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 124: Embassies and Legations; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2072, May 23, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 124.3: Employees; Hul to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, September 12, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 124.3: Employees; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2332, September 18, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, cl. 124.3: Employees; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-9; January 7, 1943, PR Honduras, Box 93, cl. 124.61: Office Hours.

³⁸ In November 1942, after another plea for more personnel Philip Bonsal of the Department wrote Gerald Drew (chargé in Guatemala at that point) that he appreciated the heavy burden on the staff in Guatemala, but added somewhat acidly that “under present conditions we all of us have our hands more than full”. Bonsal to Drew, November 27, 1942, PR Guatemala (SCF_ Box 5, cl. 711.5: Deportation.

³⁹ For some comments on ARA’s workload, see: Daniels, Memorandum, January 6, 1941, Lot Files, ARA, Entry 212: Memorandums relating to Administrative Matters, January 6, 1938 to June 29, 1943 (henceforth Entry 212), Box 1, Folder marked 1941; Ray to Daniels, May 19, 1941, Lot Files, Entry 212, Box 1, Folder marked 1941.; Daniels, Memorandum, May 24, 1941, Lot Files, Entry 212, Box 1, Folder marked 1941; Chapin, Memorandum, May 9, 1942, Lot Files, Entry 212, Box 1, Folder marked 1942.

⁴⁰ Unknown author to Shaw, may 28, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 34, cl. 123; Archer Woodward (U.S. Consul to Guatemala) to Des Portes, January 13, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 59, cl. 123: Personal Records of Officers; Drew to John Erhardt (Chief of the Division of Foreign Service Personnel), February 19, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 59, cl. 123: Personal Records of Officers; Drew to Cabot, April 2, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 59, cl. 123: Personal Records of Officers; Drew

Not surprisingly, the work of the legations suffered from the constant strain and shortages of personnel. This situation had some very significant consequences for the efficiency of the Central American posts. First of all, the attention of the legations shifted from their usual focus on internal political matters to the many new tasks surrounding the war-effort. As Cabot indicated, routine reporting and in depth analysis of local politics did not receive as much attention as under normal circumstances. This claim is backed up by the volume and topic distribution of the legation's files. The volume of files devoted solely to reports on local political conditions dropped while the number of subject headings and volume of paperwork related to the war-effort greatly expanded. Comments of outside observers, mainly State Department inspectors and officers, confirm the direction of the trend away from political reporting: A 1941 inspection report of the Honduran post, for example, shows that the legation devoted most of its manpower to reports on supposed Axis activities in the region, at the expense of reports on local conditions. A broader State Department study of that same year noted that political reports from the field focused mainly on totalitarian activities, rather than local events.⁴¹ This was not just to blame on the men on the ground, of course. The Department itself showed little or no interest in local political affairs.⁴²

Secondly, and perhaps more seriously, even war-related work was often handled in a somewhat superficial manner. In and of itself, the need for coordination between the many wartime agencies operating in Central America; the complex and ever-changing requirements of economic warfare; the surveillance of thousands of locally resident Axis nationals; the negotiation of new agreements and treaties, etc, etc was so demanding a job, especially considering the lack of personnel, that the legations mainly confined themselves to the handling of these matters on paper. There was no manpower available to handle the practical side of these matters or even to check up on their correct execution. For example, when the Department inquired after the efficiency and significance of the work that several wartime agencies were doing in Honduras under the general coordination of the legation, the best answer that the legation could provide was that "aside from wasting money and time, the agencies appear to do no particular harm".⁴³

The State Department rarely pressured its legations to follow up on the cooperative agreements negotiated with the caudillos, except, perhaps, where the suppression of fifth column activities and the flow of strategic materials was concerned. The Department never expected much in the way of material benefits from its Central

to John William Baily, Jr. (Assistant Chief of the Division of Foreign Service Personnel), July 6, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 59, cl. 123: Personal Records of Officers.

⁴¹ Charles B. Hosmer (U.S. Foreign Service inspector) to the Department of State, December 1, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 1, cl. 124.6: Inspection Report; Background Memorandum Explanatory of Principal Services Requested of our Diplomatic Missions and certain Consulates, May 9, 1941, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 5, Folder marked May, 1941.

⁴² Dawson to Hanke, February 12, 1943, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 14, Folder marked Analysis and Liaison: November 1942 to July 1943.

⁴³ Faust to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-102, October 28, 1942, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 5, cl. 124.66: Records and Correspondence.

American alliances. It wanted the isthmian states to back the inter-American war measures; it wanted photographs of the caudillos signing their declarations of war⁴⁴; it wanted quotations from the local president's speeches that gave voice to local support for the war-effort⁴⁵, all of it in the interest of presenting a united bloc of states under American leadership for the benefit of both domestic and foreign audiences.⁴⁶ In a word, the Department was well aware of, and imminently satisfied with the fact that cooperation with the Central American republics existed mainly on paper.

The result of these developments for the relationship between the legations and the local regimes was twofold: First, the legations relied more and more on their personal associations with the local presidents and their trusted allies. Second, the legations lost sight of the local political situation. The context of local politics faded from the legations' reports, to be largely replaced by the context of fighting an international war.

Outwardly, the Central American administrations showed themselves very willing to cooperate with the legations. For the hand-full of overworked officials at the American legations, this cooperative pose must have been very gratifying: Without it, it would be well nigh impossible to meet the demands of the State Department. The stability and continued rule of the Central American regimes thus became an important asset to the American legations—leading to a grossly inflated estimate of the importance of the regimes to U.S. wartime interests and of the consequences of their possible demise. Thus, Frazer would not raise the issue of the suppression of ADS, for fear of “indulging in improper criticism” of Martínez, as we have seen. Erwin and Des Portes went much further. Erwin did not let an occasion go by to emphasize Carías' personal cooperative stance. The minister also came to believe that if anything happened to Carías the country would be thrown into chaos, because there was no one in Honduras who was of sufficient prestige to take his place.⁴⁷ Des Portes argued, in a personal letter to Laurence Duggan of the State Department, that “any political disturbances” would be very unfortunate “in view of the international situation”. The minister goes on that—despite the views of some observers who feel that the government is dominated by Nazi sympathizers—he personally felt that “we are getting one-hundred percent cooperation from President Ubico (...) and any change that might occur could only operate to the detriment of our war effort”.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ For example: Hull to Erwin, Telegram 87, December 12, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 68, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive

⁴⁵ For example: Josephus Daniels (U.S. Ambassador to Mexico) to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, August 18, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 45, cl. 711: War Peace. Friendship. Alliance; Frazer to Daniels, August 21, 1941, PR El Salvador, Box 45, cl. 711: War Peace. Friendship. Alliance.

⁴⁶ For example: Hull to the Embassies and Legations in Latin America, November 10, 1942, PR Honduras, cl. 711: War. Peace. Friendship. Alliance.

⁴⁷ Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2551, January 8, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Honduras; Pate, Memorandum for the American Minister, January 23, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 12, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 304, December 23, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Revolutions. Honduran Political Exiles.

⁴⁸ Des Portes to Duggan, November 27, 1942, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 5, cl. 800.

This sentiment was largely shared by the State Department, where the Central American desk was occupied by John Cabot, who was previously Des Portes' secretary in Guatemala. Synthesizing the reports coming in from the field, Cabot noted that "in the larger aspect (...) we are unfortunate in having to back in effect at least three long-standing dictatorships in Central America which no longer command the confidence and respect at home and abroad that they once did. There is danger that we will find ourselves caught in the dilemma of either supporting an unpopular tyranny or of fomenting disorder which could scarcely fail to redound to the benefit of the totalitarians".⁴⁹ This seems to be the highest level at which this problem was contemplated and for the duration of the War, the State Department was satisfied to let matters in Central America run their course as long as cooperation was forthcoming.

2.2 Friends in practice? The soldier's war.

How the developments and prejudices described above influenced the thinking of the U.S. ministers in Central America can be more readily appreciated, if we contrast their views with those of the American military representatives in the region. Around the beginning of the War, American military representatives greatly expanded their political reporting. Apparently, they were acting on the orders of the War Department, which was desirous to know how the political situation on the ground could affect military planning. The reports of the American Naval Attaché in Central America, Frank June, are greatly at odds with the reports of the American legations. This is significant because it demonstrates that the opinions of the American legations should not be taken at face value.

Taking Guatemala as an example, Captain June was carefully optimistic about Ubico's willingness to cooperate with the United States at the start of the War. Only a few months into the War, however, the Naval Attaché came to the remarkable conclusion that:

At first glance, the Guatemalan Government appears to be cooperating fully with the United States. Closer scrutiny however reveals certain flaws in her spirit of cooperation which tend to indicate that the Government is pursuing perhaps a policy of economic and political expediency. There are likewise certain considerations which tend to indicate that Guatemala may be prepared to reverse its position at some time in the future, if such reversal is warranted by world events.

The attaché came to this conclusion after a very extensive investigation of Guatemala's practical contributions to the war-effort. June noted that Guatemala refused to use its own artillery to protect its ports; that it had deported Nazi prisoners to the U.S. only to be rid of the burden of taking care of them; that its decrees against Nazi activities lacked "teeth" in practice; that its government was full of Nazi sympathizers; etc, etc.

⁴⁹ Cabot to Winters and Bonsal, October 6, 1941, Lot Files, ARA, Entry 209: Memorandums Relating to Individual Countries, March 3, 1918 to December 31, 1947 (henceforth Entry 209) Office of American Republic Affairs: Individual Countries, Box 46, Folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947.

Concerning this last point, the legation agreed with June, but the captain was not convinced (as the legation was) that Ubico himself was pro-American:

The American Legations feels strongly that the President himself is sincere in his desire to cooperate with the United States and it is therefore possible that the aforementioned points are the responsibility of his subordinates. However, in a country which is so dominated by one man, it is difficult to believe that he should be unaware of the topics brought out in this [report].⁵⁰

The attaché stuck to this analysis throughout his tenure in Guatemala and even grew more disillusioned as time progressed. Over the course of about two years, he became convinced that Ubico only cooperated because he wanted U.S. military and economic assistance without the sacrifices involved in fighting the War.⁵¹ In March of 1942, Captain June summarized the effects of U.S. policy on Central American governments in general:

They regard us as A-1 suckers. They believe that their own particular country is now vitally important to the United States and that they can therefore put pressure on the United States to obtain economic or other concessions in exchange for permitting the use of their territory for military purposes. They construe our foreign policy, in its application to them, as anemic and as a sign of our softness and impending disintegration. While they are willing to accept our handouts, they neither trust nor respect us. We are speaking to them in a language which Latins, long accustomed to tyrannical and dictatorial treatment, do not understand (...) The dictator-presidents of some Central American Countries are so accustomed to dictate to their own people that they are under the impression that they can now dictate to the United States also."⁵²

June blamed Guatemala's lax cooperation in the war-effort on United States Foreign Policy, which he believed "has been on the wrong track or (...) has been improperly administered in the field".⁵³ Des Portes, on his part, complained on several occasions that June and other military representatives were venturing beyond their jurisdiction with their political reporting. The State Department agreed, but was unwilling to tell the War Department to silence its representatives abroad.⁵⁴

While Frazer seemed to have had little trouble with the military people, Erwin's relationship with the military attachés was even tenser than that between Des Portes and June. In many cases the point of contention, cooperation with the local regime, was the same. Erwin reported that his military attaché, Thomas Austin, was paranoid about the

⁵⁰ June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 51-42, January 30, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 47, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.

⁵¹ June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 181-42, April 14, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 47, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.

⁵² June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 134-42, March 19, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 57, cl. 800: Guatemala. June notes that this analysis applies particularly well to Guatemala and Nicaragua.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Drew to James B. Stewart (U.S. Minister to Nicaragua), October 17, 1942, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 5, cl. 800: Central America; Long to Bonsal, December 2, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 121: Naval Attaché; Bonsal to Long, December 14, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.

intentions of the Honduran government.⁵⁵ On a later occasion, Erwin proclaimed—at least somewhat diplomatically—his belief that “our Military Attaché obtained [his] information where the spider gets the material for his web and that some of his reports had little more substance”.⁵⁶ When an American military instructor, “after much soul searching”, informed the legation that the military preparedness of Honduras against *foreign* aggression was not up to par, Erwin offhandedly dismissed the information because, the minister believed, the instructor was biased and, due to his low military rank, not fit to evaluate state policies anyway. When the same instructor offered further information on the substance of Cárías’ cooperation, Erwin refused to listen to him, choosing to believe that the local regime was entirely frank in its support of the war-effort.⁵⁷

Why did the views of some of the military people differ so much from that of the legations? A major part of the explanation must be that American diplomats and military officers worked with widely different sources of information. The legations came to rely on its personal relation with the local presidents, who put up quite a show to convince the Americans of their cooperative stance. Furthermore, the legations were overwhelmed by the “paper” side of wartime cooperation, while Captain June and others were more intimately familiar with the practical sides of that cooperation. Guatemala, for example, cooperated fully on paper (as June also attests), but its practical cooperation lagged behind. It seems probable that the legation was only acquainted with the different war-time treaties and agreements between the United States and Guatemala and did not have the manpower or the expertise to evaluate the execution of those treaties.

As June argued, the Ubico administration regarded anyone who showed undue enthusiasm for the war against dictatorship with suspicion (for obvious reasons) and it did everything it could to prevent people from visiting the American legation to voice their concerns about the Guatemalan dictatorship.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the captain himself became well acquainted with the growing dissatisfaction over Ubico’s long-time reign.⁵⁹ During the early forties, junior officers in the Guatemalan army became restless because the Ubico administration hampered their upward mobility and relied mainly on the support of Guatemala’s many Generals (in 1944, these junior officers would have a major role to play in the revolution). Unlike the diplomatic officers at the legation, Captain June witnessed this growing discontent through his close acquaintances in the Guatemalan

⁵⁵ Erwin to Philip Bonsal (Chief, Division of Latin-American Affairs), December 24, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 75, Vol. II, cl. 123: Erwin.

⁵⁶ Faust to the Secretary of State, Telegram 127, June 9, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 15, cl. 891: Censorship of the Press.

⁵⁷ Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1452, July 11, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 2, cl. 820: Military Affairs.

⁵⁸ June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 16-43, January 19, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.

⁵⁹ June to Long, February 6, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 60, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 10-43, January 11, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.

army. For the time being, however, the legations were out of touch with the latest internal political developments and focused on supposed fifth column threats.

3. THE SIXTH COLUMN

During the Spanish Civil War, the Nationalist General Emilio Mola boasted that the four columns of his army advancing on Madrid were aided by a clandestine “fifth column” of sympathizers within the city that would undermine the Republican government. Fear of agents provocateur, saboteurs, spies, agitators, etc. was as old as war itself, but the image of a fifth column was something new altogether. It suggested whole cadres of enemies—not just the lone spook—hard at work to deliver cities or even whole countries into the hands of the adversary without a shot being fired. After the Civil War, the image was applied in the West to explain German successes during the Second World War. Although the strength of the German fighting forces was generally recognized, their quick and easy victories in 1939 and 1940 seemed impossible unless they had received assistance from the inside. Thus, inordinate significance was ascribed to the role of Norwegian “Quislings” or French collaborators, setting off an international fifth column scare that hit the United States with full force by 1940. As a result, thousands of “enemy aliens”, Germans, Italians, and Japanese, were interned in the United States because of their potential to form a fifth column.⁶⁰

The domestic fifth column scare, which lasted from roughly 1940 to 1942, had far-reaching consequences. Francis MacDonnell catalogued some of the results of the powerful wave of fear that swept the United States early in the War:

The FBI’s manpower, funding, and authority rapidly expanded. The British and American intelligence communities established close ties of cooperation. The United States developed its own capacity for Fifth Column operations in the form of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and later the Central Intelligence Agency. Congress passed important security legislation and took an active part in investigating alleged domestic subversion. Isolationism lost credibility as a viable foreign policy option for the United States...These changes fostered American internationalism abroad while accelerating the creation of a powerful intelligence establishment at home.⁶¹

The irony of it all was that there never was a *serious* fifth column threat against the United States: While small, ineffectual spy networks did exist and did form a basis for the scare, the latter was caused, fed, and sustained by a historic mistrust of German expansionism, lightning fast German advances from 1939 onward, and alarmist accounts by the American yellow press. The American government did not discourage the developing scare because, on the one hand, it was concerned about the fifth column too, while, on the other hand, the internationalist Roosevelt Administration gratefully employed the fifth column image to silence isolationist critics. Meanwhile, the British intelligence services chipped in by feeding information about German subversion to their

⁶⁰ Louis de Jong, *De Duitse Vijfde Colonne in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [The German fifth column in the Second World War] (Arnhem and Amsterdam 1953) 3.

⁶¹ MacDonnell, *Insidious foes*, vii

American counterparts. The British hoped that the United States would be more sympathetic to the travails of Europe if it felt directly threatened by the Nazi's. Lastly, as the United States developed its own intelligence agencies to hunt down Nazis across the hemisphere—FBI, OSS, Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), Military Intelligence Division (MID), Secret Service, and special divisions within the Treasury and State Departments—the competition, overzealousness, and ambitions of these agencies began to play an important role in the supply of misinformation about the extend of the fifth column threat.⁶²

The Dutch historian Louis de Jong, probably the first to seriously investigate the phenomenon of the fifth column scare from a historical perspective, established that Hitler and the Nazi top were not interested in the conquest or invasion of the American continent—at least not in the short term—and did not develop spy rings to prepare for it. Later German studies confirmed De Jong's findings. Reiner Pommerin established that up to about 1941, Hitler was in fact careful not to antagonize the United States. Some halfhearted programs to establish spy rings or to elicit the loyalty of German colonies on the American continent were developed by the middle sections of the German Foreign Ministry and the *Auslandabteilung* of the Nazi Party. These programs failed because of lack of support from the German leadership; rivalry between the state bureaucracy and the Party; resistance from the German colonies; and watchfulness of the American nations. Only the German program to improve trade relations with South America was modestly successful before 1939, but quickly fell apart after the start of the War. The small German "spy rings" that did exist, notably in Uruguay and the United States, were amateurish affairs and were quickly eliminated by local intelligence services.⁶³

The story of the fifth column scare and the (largely) unjustified program of internment of Americans of foreign origin inside the United States is fairly well known. Somewhat less familiar is the fact that Washington actively pursued the alleged fifth column in Latin America too. The American perception of a fifth column threat to Latin America led to the establishment of a hasty program for the deportation and internment of thousands of Germans and Japanese. It also justified the American expansion of intelligence activities in the region and the establishment of firm military ties with Southern governments. In this case also, historians later asserted that the danger of actual enemy subversion was too small to justify the disruptive and ethically questionable measures taken against the "fifth columnists". Historian Max Friedman even quipped that the real threat to Latin America society was not from a fifth column, but from a sixth column of people who believed in the existence of the fifth column.⁶⁴

The consequences of American actions against the German threat to Latin America were no less significant than the results of the domestic fifth column scare. In the words of Friedman:

⁶² *idem*, i-vii; Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 48-64 and 73; Bratzel and Leonard, *Latin America during World War II*, 5-7.

⁶³ De Jong, *De Duitse Vijfde Colonne*, 263-283 ; Pommerin, *Das Dritte Reich*, 27-44 ; Pommerin, "Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland", 398-406.

⁶⁴ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 57.

...some of the same faulty practices established in the anti-German campaign were redirected toward the [Communists during the Cold War] – producing even more ineffective foreign policy and a sanguinary record that fueled further conflict with the rest of the Americas. The campaign against the Germans living in the region not only ruined the temporary gains of the Good Neighbor policy and failed to achieve its central goal of improving hemispheric security; it also created a precedent for the excesses of the anti-Communist crusade that obsessed the United States over the next fifty years...⁶⁵

It might be added—or specified—that the Nazi hunt in Central America had a particularly negative effect on the American Foreign Service, which was the backbone of the “sixth column” there. First of all, the legations allowed themselves to lose sight of local events while they focused their attention on the apparition of the fifth column—a theme that will be further examined in the next chapter. Second, the nonintervention principle, which, rhetorically at least, had become something of a religious dogma, was all but abandoned in the interest of “fighting” the War. Third, and most damningly perhaps, Foreign Service officers in Central America and Washington started to appreciate the usefulness of having “sons-of-bitches” on their side against the Nazis. During the War, American diplomats developed the justifications for tolerating and even supporting local tyrannies that would also inform U.S. Cold War policy.

Throughout the 1930s, American Foreign Service officers in Central America were mainly preoccupied with internal political developments. That this should change during the War is partly due to the demands of the State Department, but a changing conception of what diplomacy should be about also played a major role. Geopolitical considerations became important during the War, even though, at first glance, the Central American posts seemed far removed from battle. However, Central America’s geographical position, in between the United States and the all-important Panama Canal, made it an obvious military target for the enemy. The relatively large colonies of German immigrants could easily be imagined to contain enemy agents. Also, “many in the United States thought Latin American countries could not manage their own affairs without paternal guidance from Washington, and assumed that the hidden hand of a European power lay behind any significant unrest or discordance with U.S. plans”.⁶⁶

In addition De Jong argued that many people who were not directly involved in fighting the War felt an urge to participate in some useful way. Calling to mind the feelings of uncertainty, undirected aggression, and helplessness that plagued those who lived through the War, De Jong wrote that:

This inner tension, which is triggered by that acute though nameless fear, by that aggressiveness bereft of an immediate target, and by that feeling of helplessness and insecurity, could be discharged once one finds *in their own surroundings* an individual upon whom the mark of “hostile” could be set: then the fear would lose its mysterious, vague character; the undirected

⁶⁵ *Idem*, 12.

⁶⁶ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3.

aggression [would] get a target; the helplessness and insecurity [would] be dissolved in an immediate duty: the attack on the “enemy in our midst”. Executing that attack, one would “do something”, “help to win the war”.⁶⁷

Officers in the United States Foreign Service did find a niche for themselves in the larger fight against fascism—even when they were serving in places far removed from actual combat. By securing the cooperation of neutrals and allies and by coordinating American wartime measures in other countries, thus securing lines of communication, flow of strategic materials, and keeping a check on enemy activities, the Foreign Service felt that it fulfilled a vital role in winning the War.

Though this self-perception became commonplace during the Cold War, it was a departure from situation in the 1930s. In his unpublished memoirs, Caffery, for example, described the job in idealistic terms: “If you are a good Foreign Service officer, you are very good, and you have the most marvelous opportunity in the world for doing really big things for your country and for the world and for humankind and even for God. But if you are not good, you are no good in the world. So decide for yourself”.⁶⁸ Those officers whose professional education coincided with the War, however, entertained much more combative—“realistic” would be their own term—ideas about their work. After the War, they no longer conceived of the world as a place where good, constructive things could be accomplished, but as a dangerous, threatening place where self-interest and vigilance were the prerequisites of sound diplomacy. John Cabot, secretary of legation in Guatemala around the start of the War, argued in his memoirs that:

The United States has no imperial ambitions, but it must reckon with the imperial ambitions of others, and we cannot expect that we alone can sustain ourselves against any and all adversaries. We are irremediably dependent upon loyal allies and friendly neutrals to help us and supply us with our needs. And that is what I mean when I say that our diplomatic representatives abroad, who must do everything in their power to see that our international relationships are favorable in the event of a crisis, are our first line of defense.⁶⁹

This bleak outlook came to dominate the view of the postwar generation—those “born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace” in Kennedy’s words. Students as well as practitioners of diplomacy, Kennan, Morgenthau, Lippmann, Niebuhr, all expounded the “Realist” attitude shown by Cabot and maligned the starry-eyed idealism of men like Caffery.

Even if this changing attitude in the Foreign Service was very gradual and thus hard to pinpoint in the Legations’ records, it will hopefully become clear that it provides a general background for the other two developments: The changing conceptions of nonintervention and cooperation with dictatorships. In the context of the fight against fascism, American diplomats became increasingly tolerant—even appreciative—of harsh measures to “save” the “free world”. Many formerly cherished aspects of international

⁶⁷ De Jong, *De Duitse Vijfde Colonne*, 326. Translation by the author.

⁶⁸ Cabot, *First line of Defense*, 26.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, ix.

law, American political culture, and the Good Neighbor policy were abandoned because imminent dangers required it. One cannot define a single government directive or State Department decision that revoked the previously “neighborly” attitude of the United States toward Latin America. Rather, the prewar taboo on such things as intervention, propaganda measures, and military and intelligence cooperation with local tyrants were slowly and sometimes unconsciously subverted—be it in the name of protecting democracy against fascism—by State Department officials. In the meantime, the ideal of Good Neighborliness was still upheld rhetorically.

Up to about 1940, the State Department and the Foreign Service maintained a principled attitude in matters such as intervention, propaganda, intelligence, and arms trade. The non-intervention policy is of course well known, but with regard to the execution of its diplomacy, the State Department also felt that cultural attachés were inappropriate, because “the conception of an official culture is entirely alien to the United States”:

...it may be pointed out that it has been particularly the totalitarian states which have been desirous of appointing “cultural attachés”, whose activities and whose identification with propaganda not conducive to the maintenance of stable conditions in the receiving countries, are sufficiently well known.⁷⁰

An illustrative example of the Department’s attitude toward intelligence gathering is Secretary of State Henry Stimson’s famous decision in 1929 to cut funding of the “Cipher Bureau”—a Department agency devoted to cracking the diplomatic codes of other countries. The reason given by the Secretary was that: “Gentlemen do not read each other’s mail”. In 1940, the Department did suggest, tentatively, that its legations in Latin America should use “to a greater extent than heretofore the information available to intelligent and loyal American citizens resident abroad” in connection with “present world conditions”. However, the Department refused to acknowledge that it was “organizing an intelligence service”. Instead, it considered its first steps into the realm of intelligence gathering merely as an informal arrangement with trusted Americans abroad: “The Department believes (...) that most reputable Americans will welcome an opportunity to be of service at this time even though their activities must necessarily be rendered gratis (no funds being available for the purchase of information) and without evidence of public recognition”.⁷¹

During the War, however, cultural attachés and FBI agents (“legal attachés”) were sent to all American republics to conduct large scale propaganda programs and to gather intelligence on “non-American” activities. These men were joined by military instructors who were to ease the introduction of American armaments to the sister republics and economic advisors to wage economic warfare on Axis nationals. These new activities were also accompanied by more benign programs for the improvement of roads, hospitals, sewers, agricultural techniques, and educational programs—all

⁷⁰ Messerschmith to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, December 12, 1939, Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1993/I, cl. 121: Cultural and Educational Attaché.

⁷¹ Messerschmith to Frederick F. Salter (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to Honduras), October 23, 1941, Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1993/I, cl. 124.66: Records and Correspondence.

intended to bolster the stability of local governments and thus secure a constant flow of strategic materials to the United States. What the proliferation of wartime agencies and programs meant for “non-intervention” has been observed in the first chapter and will be further developed in the next chapter: More and more Central Americans came into direct contact with the Americans, encouraging the view that the United States took a direct interest in their affairs while the opposite was true.⁷²

The legations were probably not completely aware of the extent to which U.S. agencies were interfering in Central America. While the ministers were supposed to coordinate all American activities in the country where they served, it proved difficult to manage the expanding duties of the legations themselves and still be aware of the details of programs executed by representatives of the War Department, Justice Department, Sanitation Division, Coordination Committee, etc. Furthermore, activities expanded faster than regulations on lines of command, so there was a lot of uncertainty about which agencies fell under the jurisdiction of the minister and which ones did not.⁷³ That the ministers in Central America were not professionals, except for Frazer, probably did not help.

However, the Legations themselves were very much involved in the internal affairs of Central America as well: Far-reaching economic warfare on German companies, for example, could only be accomplished by far-reaching cooperation with the local governments—to the point where the legation in Guatemala prepared the laws that the local government needed to implement to make economic warfare possible.⁷⁴ Strangely, though, the rhetorical commitment to noninterference remained intact. Naturally, it was necessary to come up with new definitions and justifications to harmonize wartime activities with a supposed attitude of noninterference. In 1941, for example, Frazer argued that encouraging Salvadoran newspapers to print “solidarity-of-the-Americans propaganda” did not constitute propaganda: “to regard the exercise of such an influence [over the Salvadoran press] as circumscribing their independence is, we think, perhaps an extreme view. As a matter of fact, the entire press of Salvador is pro-Pan-American anyhow, so that no paper would be violating its principles or sacrificing its ideals by printing [U.S. propaganda]”.⁷⁵ Likewise, when the Honduran government arrested four Honduran citizens of German stock at Erwin’s request, the Minister maintained that “in supplying these names to the Honduran Government, I did so informally and merely suggested the possibility that the Government might wish to consider the desirability of removing them”.⁷⁶

⁷² Also see chapter 7, pages 226-240.

⁷³ See chapter 1, pages 54-62.

⁷⁴ Cabot, Memorandum, October 17, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942.

⁷⁵ Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1437, July 2, 1941, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 5, cl. 891: Public Press.

⁷⁶ Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1946, April 6, 1942, PR Honduras, (SCF), Box 8, Vol. 2, cl. 820.02: Military Affairs.

Interestingly, in 1942 the Department of State became concerned about the “impression” prevalent in some Latin American countries that the United States had abandoned its popular nonintervention policy during the War.” The Axis nations were using this sentiment to their advantage, the Department believed, with propaganda about “Yankee Imperialism”:

The pretext for this propaganda is the increasing activity of this government in various enterprises on the soil of the other American republics: the construction and operation of military and naval bases, the Proclaimed List, deportations, a wide variety of economic operations (ranging from the war-connected rubber programs to projects with a pronounced “welfare” aspect, such as the health and sanitation program).

The Department patently rejected the notion that such activities were acts of intervention: “After all, intervention on behalf of special groups in the United States [a reference to business interests] has not been revived”. Furthermore, all U.S. activities were executed on the basis of “collaboration” and “what can honestly be described as [the] interests of the whole hemisphere”. This turned out to be the magic formula: As long as local collaborators could be found and as long as the objectives of the United States could be described as serving a common cause, the Department was not, in fact, intervening: “We must get off the defensive. The expression ‘nonintervention’ should give way to ‘collaboration’, as a sign of changed conditions”. Although it was not acknowledged at the time, the problem remained that local collaborators might use their connections to U.S. programs to increase their own power and prestige. Also, there was no democratic method by which the definition of the “common good” could be established: The State Department would take it upon itself to determine that.⁷⁷

In terms of cooperation with the local regimes during the War, American diplomats began to appreciate the harsh measures against subversion taken by local dictatorships. For example, in the early summer of 1940, Ubico suggested to the American legation that he could have the whole German colony expelled if this would further the cause against Nazism. John Cabot, the chargé at that time, admits that his first reaction to the plan was to “recoil at its drastic and rather inhumane implications”. However, “after having the opportunity to think it over several days”, he came to the conclusion that the idea merited serious consideration. On July 23, Cabot wrote to his superiors that the “natural instinct” to be shocked by such mass exportation should be suppressed, since the Nazi’s themselves deported thousands of Germans from Tyrol and the Baltic States—not to mention their policies against the Jews. So, even if “two wrongs do not make a right”, it was true that Hitler would not be “appeased” and that only a firm stand might stop him. To summarize his views, Cabot argues that “[it] is one thing to behave like a gentleman in a drawing room, and quite another thing to be a Casper Milquetoast

⁷⁷ Memorandum on Propaganda about Relations between this Government and the other American Republics, September 17, 1942, Lot Files, ARA, Entry 214: Miscellaneous Memorandums, January 4, 1938 to September 12, 1947 (henceforth Entry 214, Box 66, Folder marked Chapin and Toop, 1941 to December 1942).

when confronted by a thug in a dark alley". The dictatorial allies in Central America were particularly useful in this regard, since the American reply to Ubico's plan could be "worded in such a way as to place the decision entirely in the President's [i.e. Ubico's] hands". That way, the U.S. could conveniently keep its hands clean.⁷⁸

In the context of expanding intelligence and propaganda activities and the arming of the Southern neighbors, the military dictatorships of Central America turned out to be peculiarly useful allies. Not only were they particularly keen to follow U.S. policies, they also had standing armies, intelligence networks, permissive laws against subversion, and propaganda machines that could—with a little help and direction from the United States—be employed to fight the fifth column. The only liberal country in Central America, Costa Rica, was at a disadvantage in this regard: "German and Italian activities in Costa Rica date from the very beginning of the Nazi and fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. This is accounted for by the fact that (...) the Government of Costa Rica is democratic in every sense of the word and activities could therefore be carried on without any hindrance".⁷⁹ Ironically, then, the most democratic Republic of the isthmus was most vulnerable to totalitarian subversion.

The only problem was that the armies and security forces of the dictatorships were hopelessly backward institutions. The War Department even warned the State Department on several occasions that any American weapons that were sent to Central America would go to waste, because no one in those countries knew how to operate them. Thus military missions and FBI instructors were eventually sent to Central America to train the local security forces in the use of modern weapons, intelligence gathering, and surveillance—increasing the regimes' capability to control its own population. Nelson Rockefeller's famous Coordination Commission financed the dictators' official press and supplied upbeat "information" about the War and the United Nations—thus strengthening the impression that the dictators were important allies of the United States. Economic advisors helped the local authorities to nationalize German interest—giving the regimes new sources for graft and illegal enrichment. U.S. engineers built roads, sewers, hospitals, and schools with U.S. funds—but the local leaders claimed that the new services were the result of their progressive policies.

Among these many programs and activities, the growth of inter-American military relations, with its obvious implications for U.S. relations to military dictatorships and military suppression of communism during the Cold War, is one theme that receives more than passing attention in the historical treatment of war years is. Even before the War, the U.S. War Department had embarked on a project to push out external (mainly

⁷⁸ Cabot to the Secretary of State, dispatch 1304, July 23, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 3, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities. Incidentally, "Casper Milquetoast" was a character in the comic strip "*The Timid Soul*", which was published from 1924 to 1953. During that time, the character's name became a generally accepted reference to an unusually meek, submissive, or cowardly individual. The word is now no longer in use. Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *The Pocket Dictionary of American Slang* (5th edition: New York 1972).

⁷⁹ John Moors Cabot (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Costa Rica), Strictly Confidential Memorandum for Mr. Overton G. Ellis, n.d. (September, 1941), PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 42, Vol. VI, cl. 500: Congresses and Conferences.

European) arms dealers and to make American arms the standard for the entire continent. While this obviously benefited American producers, the rationale for this move was that it enabled inter-American defense cooperation. The War was a significant catalyst for inter-American military cooperation: United States lend-lease arms, military instructors, and military missions flooded the hemisphere. For historians, the proliferation of American arms and military know-how raises the question of whether the U.S. military program helped authoritarian military regimes, such as those of Central America, to maintain themselves in power. There is no easy answer to this question.⁸⁰ On the one hand, U.S. military aid to Central America was very limited both in terms of the overall lend-lease program and in terms of the inflated requests for arms made by the military regimes themselves. On the other hand, the military establishments of Central America were poorly armed and used antiquated weaponry before the War. Even a small delivery of modern (sub)machine guns or a single detachment of modern tanks represented a significant strengthening of local military forces.

The program of lend-lease was intended to provide to the American governments the means by which they could defend themselves against outside aggression and as such, could not be described as intervention, according to the Department. But in Central America, where opposition to the dictatorships mounted during the War, as will become clear in the next chapter, many people considered lend-lease to be a form of support for the local regime against its people. The State Department established jurisdiction over arms deliveries to Latin America in 1940 and was aware of the fact that any arms sent to the region could be used by the military dictatorships to maintain themselves in power. Therefore, the Department was extremely reluctant, before 1941, to deliver weapons to Central America. Such sage considerations were abandoned over the next two years, however. During those years, it should be remembered, there appeared to be a very real probability that Germany would win the War or that Japan might bomb the Panama Canal. So, without going into details about the why and wherefore of specific arms deliveries, it is understandable that the Department temporarily abandoned its carefulness in the interest of the common defense. But once the floodgates were open it was difficult to keep a check on the amount and sort of

⁸⁰ For the argument that the overall effect of military aid during the war was slight, see: John M. Baines, "U.S. Military Assistance to Latin America: An Assessment", *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 14:4 (November 1972) 469-487; Leonard, "Central America: On the Periphery", in: Leonard and Bratzel eds., *Latin America during World War II*, 50-53. For the argument that U.S. military aid significantly increased the power and prestige of local military establishments, see: Coatsworth, *The Clients and the Colossus*, 45-48. Authors who stress the importance of local military developments but do not assign a (major) role to U.S. programs are: Kenneth J. Grieb, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944", *The Americas* 32:4 (April 1976) 524-543; Williams and Walter, *Militarization and Demilitarization*. Loveman and Davies eds., *The Politics of Anti-Politics*, esp. 29-30, offers a long term analysis which indicates that, to the surprise of American policymakers themselves, the Latin American professional officer corps created by U.S. programs showed increasing interest in politics after the war and became deeply involved in local government. Child, *Unequal Alliance*, 27-62 probably offers the most detailed discussion of wartime inter-American relations, but does not arrive at an explicit conclusion on how the military programs affected the local balance of power.

weapons that reached the arsenals of Central America. In 1941, for example, a representative of the Auto Ordnance Company inquired whether the Department had any objection to its promotion of the Thompson submachine gun among the American military attachés in Latin America. The so-called “Tommy gun” was particularly useful for street fighting and could hardly be said to serve the “common defense”—the weapon would most likely be used to suppress indigenous discontent. Yet, the Department somewhat cynically informed the company that “In view of the policy which the Department has adopted of lavishing weapons and ammunition on the other American Republics (...) there was no reason why [the company] should not make [its] product known to attachés here”.⁸¹

Apart from the Department’s own reasons to provide the Central American regimes with modern weaponry, the sense of crisis that marked the early war years—say, up to the Battle of Stalingrad and the invasion of North Africa—gave the caudillos a good bargaining position. And they used it. The prime example is that of Jorge Ubico, who managed to squeeze the Americans into promising him the second best lend-lease terms—only Great Britain received arms on better terms at the time. It was not the first time, of course, that the Guatemalan dictator tried to obtain modern American weapons for his army. In 1939, the Guatemalan Foreign Minister suggested that the Guatemalan Government had 200,000 well-trained soldiers at its disposal if the United States would supply them with weapons—in fact, the army was no larger than some 5,000 badly trained recruits. In 1940, Ubico again claimed that he needed 200,000 rifles for his “trained soldiers” if his country was to be of any use to the United States in case of war. At that point, the legation and the military attachés agreed that substantial arms deliveries for Guatemala would go to waste, since the Guatemalan army was only trained for parade exercises and “not remotely capable” of using modern American arms. But since Ubico would be “very hurt” if the request were denied outright, and might even turn to the Axis for supplies, the Department decided to just stall the issue by insisting that intensive studies should first be made of the training, capabilities, and needs of the Guatemalan army first.⁸²

Ubico, however, considered such studies unnecessary and was hostile to the idea that his soldiers might require further training. So in 1941, he upped the ante. First, the Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Relations pointed out on several occasions that fascist Spain had offered a very interesting coffee-for-weapons deal. The State Department answered that it would “prefer” that the deal did not take place, considering the “political orientation” of the government of Spain. Indeed, the deal was never closed, but the Guatemalan ministry kept reminding the Americans that a deal with Spain was a possibility. Over the course of the next year, many more opportunities to put pressure on

⁸¹ Bonsal, Memorandum of Conversation with Frederick T. Willis of the Auto Ordnance Company, September 5, 1941, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 5, Folder marked General Memoranda, August to September, 1941.

⁸² Cabot to Bonsal, July 16, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Bonsal to Ray, Wilson, and Welles, January 2, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942;

Washington were thrown into Ubico's lap. In September, 1941, the United States started blacklisting German companies in Latin America, but Ubico stalled the matter for some time while the official newspaper of the capital started a bitter editorial campaign against the American plans. By the end of that year, the United States started negotiations for the unlimited use of Guatemalan airfields and ports, but Ubico delayed the matter by insisting that diplomatic protocol and ceremony be observed during the negotiations. Around that same time, Ubico allowed one of his cabinet ministers, Gonzalo Campo, to publish several articles critical of Minister Des Portes in the official press (the two had been on bad terms for some time). All the while, however, the Guatemalan President was sensible enough not to push the Americans too far: After Pearl Harbor, Guatemala immediately declared war on the Axis and some time later, Ubico suspended Guatemalan claims on British Honduras—long a source of friction with Great Britain—for the duration of the War. With this carefully balanced “push-pull” policy, Ubico managed to keep the State Department in suspense. Eventually, the Americans decided that a token of good will had to be made to ensure Guatemalan cooperation.⁸³

Around the end of January, 1942, when an agreement for the use of Guatemalan airfields was settled, the Guatemalan Government implied that it was still waiting for a delivery of rifles for some 10,000 soldiers, but that it did not plan to pay 60% of the bill as suggested by the new lend-lease laws. Rather than feeling that Ubico was pushing them around, Department officials actually felt that it had not shown proper gratitude for Guatemalan cooperation. The Division of American Republic Affairs believed that there was something to be said for the idea of supplying weapons at nominal cost to countries that had declared war spontaneously. Bonsal permitted that no-one really expected Britain to pay back a fraction of 60% of the cost of lend-lease arms. So in June of 1942, around the time that the Department was negotiating an agreement for the use of airfields in Guatemala, Washington offered Ubico an even better deal than he had been lobbying for: his army was to receive arms to the value of 3 million dollars—no strings attached!⁸⁴

⁸³ See especially: Cabot, Memorandum, December 5, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942. Also consult: Duggan, Memorandum of Conversation with the Guatemalan Minister of Foreign Affairs, September 4, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot to Hooker, Meltzer, Reinstein, and White, October 29, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot to Winters, Daniels, Duggan, and Callado, November 15, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot to Toop, Winters, and Daniels, December 8, 1941, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942

⁸⁴ Cabot to Wright, Winters, Bonsal, and Hooker, January 27, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Bonsal to Hooker, Wilson, and Duggan, January 30, 1942 Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Tomlinson to Winters and Bonsal, March 24, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Bonsal to Duggan, June 12, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot, Memorandum for the files, June 10, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Bonsal to Welles, June 11, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942;

Interestingly, the War Department dragged its feet all the while, arguing that the weapons earmarked for Guatemala could be put to much better use and that the country's ports and airfields were not even that important from a strategic point of view. It should be stressed, therefore, that the decision to deliver arms to Guatemala and its neighbors was motivated by political considerations: to strengthen bonds between the American Republics "on paper". Cabot wrote his chief at the Division, for example that the rejection of arms requests by the caudillos would "reveal a clear distrust of our allies, and thereby [give] them a cause for offense of greater intrinsic importance than any benefit they might derive from a dribble of arms..."⁸⁵ Only after about 1943, when the American arms industry was at peak production and the U.S. military started to make plans for a postwar world dominated by American arms and military tactics, did the War Department change its position on arms deliveries. Ironically, toward the end of the war the State Department began to take a dim view on the lend-lease agreements it had negotiated around 1942: with the real crisis of the War over, the diplomats began question the effects that the arms deliveries would have locally.⁸⁶ The deliveries of tanks, airplanes, and machineguns that had been negotiated in 1942 only began to arrive in the Central American capitals by 1944. In that year, the Central American populations began to mobilize against their tyrannical governments. As they marched on the presidential palaces, they encountered tanks clearly marked "U.S. army". In the end, the Department could count itself lucky that the caudillos did not have the stomach to use American weapons on their own people (at least not on a large scale) and that rebel army units managed the capture some of the lend-lease material before it could be deployed. But, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the proliferation of American arms was just one consequence of the War.⁸⁷

Bonsal to Cabot and Duggan, June 16, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942.

⁸⁵ Cabot to Bonsal, August 4, 1943, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947.

⁸⁶ Cabot notes in July, 1943, that "99 per cent" of supposedly strategic reasons to supply arms to Central America had been eliminated and that future arms deliveries could "only be used either to put down local opposition to the dictatorship, or to bestow a hail of lead on the neighbors. We would scarcely wish to connive at either". Cabot mused that lend-lease credit might be employed to deliver road building equipment to Central America, but acknowledged that a whole series of new international treaties and American laws was necessary to make this possible. Cabot to Bonsal, July 12, 1943, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947.

⁸⁷ Cabot, Memorandum on the Protection of Puerto Barrios and other Central American Ports, May 28, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot to Hawkins, August 11, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942; Cabot to Bonsal, November 10, 1942, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked Guatemala, 1936-1942. The archives of the American Embassy in San Salvador offer a very good overview of the problems involved in the deliveries of lend-lease tanks in 1944: HGA, Memorandum on Political Developments, December 29, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: El Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1448, April 5, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 98, Vol. XIII, cl. 800: El Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1452, April 11, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 800: Salvador. Political; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1465, April 14, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10,

4. BEST FRIENDS FOREVER?

A very real external threat combined with the pressure of wartime cooperation and the overrated threat of the fifth column drove the American legations in Central America into the arms of the local caudillos. While this reasoning makes the wartime alliance of convenience between the United States and the isthmian dictatorships justifiable—in a utilitarian sense anyway—and perhaps even understandable, the conceptual integration of these same dictators in a nominally democratic league of nations was not without its consequences, some of them imminently unjustifiable and difficult to understand.

In the short term, the American legations' close cooperation with the Central American regimes, and their redefinition of those regimes as part of a democratic alliance, blinded American diplomats to the fact that a new, democratically inspired opposition movement was developing against the dictatorships. Taking Guatemala as an example, there emerged broad based popular opposition to Ubico's regime. Partly inspired by wartime propaganda against dictatorship and partly inspired by purely local events, large groups in Guatemala's society rejected Ubico's rule by 1944 and they would eventually topple his regime and that of his short-lived military successors. One would expect to find some evidence that the American legation was aware of these developments, if only because they had the potential of disturbing U.S.-Guatemalan cooperation during the War. But in fact, the legation was blissfully unaware of the extent of opposition against Ubico. Even if its officials were not completely ignorant of Ubico's declining popularity, they did underestimate the dangers the regime was in. This is not to say that the American legation supported Ubico in the face of mounting opposition, but merely to argue that it expected Ubico's administration to outlast the War and that, therefore, U.S.-Guatemalan cooperation during the War was secure. Meanwhile, the new middle class, democratically inclined forces of Central America became disillusioned about American cooperation with the outmoded dictatorships. The Americans, for their part, were unable to integrate the existence of a genuinely pro-democratic movement into their conception of Central American politics.

On the long term, the language created during the 1940s to conceptualize the fight against fascism, reemerged toward the 1950s to give form and substance to the new alliances that formed to battle Soviet communism. While the supposed threat of "communistic" uprisings and disturbances played its own role in Central American politics during the 1930s, the idea that a fifth column could deliver whole countries to a foreign enemy without a shot being fired—an idea that became widely accepted during the War—influenced the way in which the American diplomatic corps dealt with the communist specter. Also, the hollowing-out of nonintervention and the tolerance for

cl. 824: Military Supplies and Equipment; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2023, June 21, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 824: Military Supplies and Equipment. Around that time, Berle notified Gade that the Department was aware of the fact that Central American oppositionists deplored the fact that the U.S. was delivering arms to the dictators, but countered that such deliveries were negotiated at a time when the fear of a German invasion was very real. Berle to Gade, Instruction 701, November 1, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 9, cl. 710: Political Relations. Treaties.

harsh suppression of anti-establishment forces—also tendencies developed during the War—allowed the American Foreign Service to play a much more significant role in support for Central American military administrations toward the end of the 1940s and especially the 1950s.

But while it is now obvious that the Second World War would be followed closely by the Cold War, it should be stressed that the future of U.S.-Central American relations remained uncertain for contemporary observers as the War came to its end. In fact, two very contradictory strands of thoughts would compete for dominance after about 1945. Firstly, many American Foreign Service officers had felt uncomfortable with dictatorial rule in Central America ever since the *continuismo* campaigns. While there was very little that could be done to change the political reality in Central America under the 1930s Good Neighbor policy, the nonintervention principle was all but hollowed out during the War. Democratically inclined diplomats had a free hand, after the War, to pursue the export of their ideology—especially because democratic opposition was growing within Central America itself. Secondly, the Foreign Service establishment had learned to work closely with the caudillos. Since internal political developments, including the growth of opposition, had largely been ignored by the Legations, some diplomats were convinced that cooperation with the military regimes should be continued after the War. Which one of these two perceptions of Central American affairs would come out on top would be worked out after the 1944 Revolutions.