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

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Chapter 1

THE ENVOYS

American diplomats in Central America, 1930-1952

A diplomat is a good diplomat if he serves his country well. He serves his country well if he plays a part, however humble in carrying out his country's policies. His country's policies (...) should be directed towards serving his country's best interests. His country's best interests should include not only its own freedom, liberty, peace[,] well-being, power, strength, and prosperity, spiritual and material, but also the freedom, liberty, peace, well-being, power, strength and prosperity, spiritual and material, of the world at large.

~ Jefferson Caffery, *n.d.*¹

The word “diplomat” probably carries different connotations for different people. Some may believe that the diplomatic corps is an elitist club made up of the scions of old-line American families who – adorned in their striped pants and silk hats – mingle with the refined and governing classes of distant lands to engage in endless intrigues. Others may think that the ambassador is just another dreary bureaucrat who spends his days with the painstaking editing of political and economic reports—his only distraction being the malaria mosquitoes that infest his tropical post. As far as the American diplomatic corps in Central America was concerned, both images have some truth to them. At these subtropical posts we do find the flashy striped-pants-diplomat, the dull administrator, and any manner of person in between.

The next eight chapters will feature some twenty American ministers and ambassadors who worked in Central America between 1930 and 1950. Despite the many individual differences between these men, there are some important similarities in the backgrounds and worldviews of the Foreign Service officers who worked in Central American at a given time. It is therefore possible to distinguish three “generations”, if you will, of envoys in the twenty odd years discussed here. While not every one of these

¹ Jefferson Caffery, “Adventures in Diplomacy” (unpublished), University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Edith Garland Dupré Library Special Collections and Archives, Collection 45: Jefferson Caffery Papers, 1902-1974, Box 69: Unpublished Memoirs.

twenty diplomatists fits into this generational mold comfortably, there are enough broad similarities within each generation to justify this attempt at generalization. Furthermore, subtle changes in the make-up of the Foreign Service in Central America, from one “generation” to the next, offer important clues as to how the character of American policy toward the region changed over time and why this was so.

1. THE GENTLEMAN DIPLOMATS, 1930-1935

The first generation of diplomats to be discussed here, managed the difficult transition, around 1930, from an interventionist American policy to a noninterventionist policy. Throughout the early twentieth century, Central American treaties which were backed up by U.S. support provided grounds for interference if not outright intervention in isthmian affairs. In 1923, the State Department brokered the so-called Treaty of Peace and Amity between the Central American states. The Treaty itself was supposed to be an improvement on a similar Treaty that dated to 1907 and had also received enthusiastic support from Washington. One of the most important objectives of the Treaty was to prevent coups and revolutions by denying would-be rebels the fruits of their victory: Article 2 of the Treaty stipulated that any government that came to power through unconstitutional means would be denied diplomatic recognition by the signatories of the Treaty. The threat of non-recognition alone was intended to deter any coup attempt from getting started. Even though Washington declined to be a signatory to the Treaty, the State Department did make it the backbone of its policy on the grounds that it was in concert with the region’s own desire for peace and stability. Commenting on the perceived importance of the Treaty, Secretary of State Stimson noted in 1932 that:

There can be no doubt in the minds of any impartial observer[s] that the treaties of 1907 and 1923 have been beneficial to the people of Central America. In the years prior to the adoption of these treaties revolution within and triumphantly from without were almost the yearly portion of the countries of Central America. The great danger always was that revolution in one country would lead to armed intervention in support of one side or the other on the part of the neighboring countries and that as so frequently occurred, general war would ensue. As a result of the 1907 and 1923 Treaties revolutions have decreased and not a single case of a general Central American war has occurred since 1907. The positive gain for Central America in the way of progress toward stability and orderly Government has thus been indisputable.²

Throughout the 1920s, however, Washington also started to distance itself from its old interventionist policy and to treat its Southern neighbors with more respect. Already in 1928, then president-elect Herbert Hoover promised to halt the deployment of U.S. troops to Latin America. It was not until 1936, however, that Secretary of State Cordell Hull made a definite promise to end all forms of intervention and interference, even if the lives of U.S. citizens were endangered.³ Between 1928 and 1936, the evolution of an

² Henry Stimson (U.S. Secretary of State) to Sheldon Whitehouse (U.S. Minister to Guatemala), November 23, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 710: Political Relations. Treaties.

³ See chapter 4, pages 127-129

unconditional non-intervention policy made slow and sometimes halting progress. State Department instructions on the non-intervention issue to its diplomatic representatives in Central America were not always clear and could even be contradictory (especially when one considers that U.S. Marines occupied Nicaragua throughout the 1920s and early 1930s).

While the Hoover administration moved away from intervention in Latin America, the State Department's fanatic support for the 1923 Treaty and Stimson's insistence that the Treaty should be used as a deterrent to—rather than a punishment for—any unconstitutional seizure of power provided a justification for unlimited interference in the internal affairs of Central America. Much like the U.S. Marines, who had served as the guarantors of free and fair elections in Nicaragua in 1932, the Treaty of 1923 made the U.S. legations in the northern Central American republics the guarantors of free elections and the protectors of constitutional governments, even if they were expected to accomplish their tasks without the benefits of armed assistance.⁴

Between 1929 and 1935 the American legations in the northern republics of Central America were led by Sheldon Whitehouse in Guatemala, Warren Delano Robbins in El Salvador, and Julius Garache Lay in Honduras. Lay served throughout the period, but in El Salvador, Robbins was replaced in 1931 by Charles Boyd Curtis who was himself effectively replaced by Jefferson Caffery in that same year. Matthew Hanna took over from Whitehouse in 1933 and remained in Guatemala until 1936. While this generation formed a link between the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations, it was in the first place a product of many years of Republican rule in the United States. Named the “generation of gentlemen” by reason of their aristocratic or upper middle class backgrounds, these men shared a unapologetic belief in the superiority of Anglo Saxon elites and in the benign effects of American rule over lesser peoples.

All of these men were born in the 19th century, with Lay being the oldest (1872) and Caffery the youngest (1886). Though not exactly amateur diplomats—since they all made a career in foreign affairs—they had all joined the service before it became a professional civil service in 1924. Concurrently, they all shared some of the characteristics of that “old school” generation. As far as their life stories can be reconstructed, it is clear that Whitehouse, Robbins, and Caffery were all scions of aristocratic families while Lay, Curtis, and Hanna came from somewhat more modest, upper-middle class families. Like many diplomats from their generation, Robbins and Curtis were schooled at Groton and Harvard. Whitehouse went to the no less prestigious Eton—where, it was said later, he acquired his distinctive accent and urbane manners—and later attended Yale. Caffery, Lay, and Hanna had to make do without Ivy League educations. Caffery, whose family came from Lafayette, attended Tulane University.

⁴ On 1923 Treaties: Leonard, *Central America*, 80-83. Leonard characterizes the Treaties as the “high water-mark of constitutionalism”. According to Leonard, the Department's conviction that the earlier and similar 1907 Treaties had provided stability was naïf. Such calm as existed was rather caused by a convergence of interests between the Department, U.S. businesses in the region, and local elites. See also: Findling, *Close neighbors*, chapter 4.

Lay's father was an army officer who was transferred regularly and thus provided his son with private tutors. Hanna was a military man himself and had graduated with honors from West Point in 1897.⁵

Caffery seems to have been the only one who entered the Foreign Service *after* examination. Whitehouse, Lay, Robbins, and Curtis started their careers in diplomacy as the private secretaries of established diplomats. Lay got a position at the consulate in Ottawa in 1889 through his father, who had been appointed consul-general there thanks to the intervention of Republican vice-president Levi Morton.⁶ Whitehouse, Curtis and Robbins became private secretaries of the ambassadors in London, St. Petersburg, and Lisbon respectively. All their mentors were political appointees of the Roosevelt and Taft administrations. Whitehouse doubtlessly obtained the most desirable position as the protégé of one-time Republican vice-presidential candidate Whitelaw Reid at the Court of St. James, the most prestigious of all American embassies. It was not unusual at the time that young men from wealthy families chose to join the diplomatic service. The excitement of travel and the idea of serving the country appeared more attractive than tending the family fortune. Family networks could be applied to obtain a secretarial position at some prestigious foreign post, so that their social lives need not suffer. For many, this would just be a temporary adventure, a great opportunity mingle with foreign dignitaries for a year or so. As Caffery later remembered, he joined the service “for the lard”.⁷

As for Hanna, he joined the Service after a 26 year military career. After his graduation, Hanna was assigned to Cuba, where he served as an aide to American military governor Leonard Wood, who is probably best known for co-founding the 1st Volunteer Cavalry regiment, popularly known as the “Rough Riders”. Among other things, Hanna had the important task of reforming Cuba's educational system in his function of Commissioner of Public Schools of Cuba from 1900 to 1902. After Cuba, Hanna continued to serve General Wood—who may have considered him a protégé—in several other capacities, but in February 1917 he made a career change: becoming an assistant at the American embassy in Mexico City. From that time on, Hanna's career was on the fast track: He became minister in Managua after just 12 years in the Foreign Service (the average “career official” served at least 15 years before he was first considered for such a post).

⁵ On Whitehouse, see: *Register* (1933) 278; “Sheldon Whitehouse dies at 82; Career diplomat for 26 years”, *NYT* (August 7, 1965) 21. On Curtis, see *Register* (1933) 151. On Robbins, see: *Register* (1935) 284; “Warren D. Robbins dies of pneumonia”, *NYT* (April 8, 1935) 19; “Robbins dead; N.Y. rites set for U.S. envoy”, *TWP* (April 8, 1935) 1. On Lay, see: *Register* (1934) 204; “Ex-Envoy J.G. Lay, Long in Service”, *NYT* (August 29, 1939) 20; “Julius G. Lay Dies at 67 in Massachusetts”, *TWP* (August 29, 1939) 21. On Caffery, see: *Register* (1950) 74; “Jefferson Caffery, Dean of Diplomatic Service, dies”, *NYT* (April 14, 1974) 48; “Envoy Jefferson Caffery dies”, *TWP* (April 17, 1974) D8.

⁶ Henry E. Mattox, *The Twilight of Amateur diplomacy: The American Foreign Service and its Senior Officers in the 1890s* (Kent et al. 1989) 29-31.

⁷ Robert D. Schultinger, *The making of Diplomatic Mind: the training, outlook, and style of United States Foreign Service officers, 1908-1931* (Middletown 1975); Caffery, “Adventures”, Caffery Papers, Box 69.

Why Hanna joined the Foreign Service and climbed the ranks so fast cannot be ascertained. His international experience in the army probably prepared him for such work (he appears to have been “glib” in Spanish and he had practiced his administrative skills as Commissioner of Public Schools in Cuba). But the clue to his successes in the service was, according to a State Department memorandum, “his intimacy with Henry Fletcher”. Henry Prather Fletcher was a prominent Republican (he would be Chairman of the Republican National Commission from 1934 to 1936). It is definitely plausible that he had a hand in Hanna’s promotions and he may even have been the one who invited Hanna to join the service. Hanna’s first assignment to Mexico coincides with Fletcher’s appointment as ambassador to that country. Also, Fletcher was under-secretary of state (the second-ranking official at the Department) when Hanna was called to Washington to serve as Chief of Mexican Affairs. Hanna’s only appointment to Europe in 1924 occurred while Fletcher was serving his country as ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, and Italy respectively. Hanna’s “personal intimacy” with Fletcher is probably due to his former acquaintance with General Wood. Wood himself had become a notable Republican – he was a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1920, but lost out to Warren G. Harding. Wood’s friendship to Fletcher probably dates back further, however: they were both former “rough riders”.⁸

Some evidence has survived of the fascinating lives these six men lived in the early twentieth century Foreign Service. Caffery, for example, wrote a lively, unpublished memoir of his diplomatic career that reveals little about American foreign policy, but does describe the “season” at the Swedish royal court; hunting expeditions with the Persian Shah; and the fine horses of a French prince, which he would take out for rides through the *Bois de Bologne*, together with Sheldon Whitehouse. The latter’s early experience in the Foreign Service is recounted in *The New York Times*: the social pages. He traveled Europe and indulged in New York’s social life; spending many a summer in Newport, attending society events, and joining elite Gentlemen’s clubs such as the Racquet and Tennis Club, the Huguenot Society, and the Sons of the Revolution. Matthew Hanna, probably from a less aristocratic family than Whitehouse, was introduced to European high society through the Foreign Service and eventually married a German baroness.⁹

The fascination of American diplomats with European culture and high society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is well documented.¹⁰ American

⁸ Register (1935) 182-183; “Seven career men named as envoys”, *NYT* (December 6, 1929) 15; “Matthew E. Hanna, diplomat, is dead”, *NYT* (February 20, 1936) 20; “The Hoover week”, *TM* (Monday, December 16, 1929); Unmarked files (Long to Hull, February, 1933), New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Collection 1972-003: Elisha V. and Boaz W. Long Papers, Box 44, folder 109: Analysis of incumbents in Diplomatic Service, 1933.

⁹ Caffery, “Adventures”, Caffery Papers, Box 69; “Matthew E. Hanna marries a Baroness”, *NYT* (April 29, 1925) 21. For a small sample of Whitehouse’s appearances on the social pages, see page 29, footnote 18, below.

¹⁰ Wiel, *A Pretty Good Club*, especially 24-45; Schultzing, *The Diplomatic Mind*, especially 3-11; Kenneth Paul Jones ed., *U.S. Diplomats in Europe, 1919-1941* (Oxford and Santa Barbara 1981) passim.

diplomatic customs, protocol, and dress were modeled on those of Europe and American diplomats were fascinated by the social prestige and cosmopolitan elegance of their European colleagues.¹¹ European courts and European high society were the favorite playing grounds of young diplomats like Whitehouse, Caffery, or Hanna. And while the American corps was acutely aware of the ideological distance between themselves and the European aristocracy—convinced as they were that the policies they represented were inspired by a democratic spirit¹²—in social terms the European elite was its point of reference. Historian Martin Wiel, for example, recounts the fascinating experience of one Arthur Bliss Lane who was a Foreign Service officer at the Polish court in the 1920s. Lane's experiences are especially interesting because he shared his background and worldview with the six men discussed here; joined the service around the same time and for similar reasons; and was appointed to Central America, Nicaragua in his case, in the early thirties. American Foreign Service officers of the time, Wiel writes:

...by choice and by temperament became honorary members of the Polish aristocracy. Lane, in particular, judged Warsaw as he judged [his native] New York—by the elegance and lavishness of the entertainments enjoyed by the idle rich.¹³

The firm class distinctions of Europe appeared entirely natural to these men—just as it was natural that they should be part of its upper crust.

All this is not to say that these young diplomatists did not have to work. They worked very hard and social functions were part of their job—sometimes a rather demanding part. It so happened, however, that the six men discussed here liked the service, whether it was despite or due to all the social obligations, and dedicated their lives to it. As these things go, they all slowly climbed the ranks during the early part of the 20th century, each of them serving as consul or secretary in several European and Latin American posts before they were given command of one of their own. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, all six were apparently considered experienced enough to be promoted to the rank of minister. Interestingly, all six of them served their first tour as chief of mission in Central America and the Caribbean: For Caffery it was Salvador in 1926; for Curtis the Dominican Republic in 1930; for Lay Honduras in 1930; for Robbins El Salvador in 1929; for Hanna it was Nicaragua in 1929; and for Whitehouse Guatemala in 1930.

It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that the State Department wanted to test its young ministers in these backwater posts before sending them to more important posts. In fact, during the late 1920s many Foreign Service officers still looked upon Latin American tours as a demotion or as punishment duty. Hoover's Under-Secretary for Latin American Affairs Francis White (born in Baltimore; patrician family; Yale graduate) was determined to change this mentality. In the context of a broader push to improve

¹¹ David Paull Nickles, "US Diplomatic Etiquette during the Nineteenth Century", in: Markus Mösslang and Torsten Riotte eds., *The Diplomats' World. A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914* (Oxford et al. 2008) there 287-316.

¹² Nickles, "Diplomatic etiquette" and Schultzingler *The Diplomatic Mind*, especially 6-7.

¹³ Wiel, *A pretty good club*, 24-26.

U.S.-Latin American relations, White made sure that experienced career men were appointed to the Latin posts. Publicly at least, both Lay and Curtis were presented as the “bright young men” of the State Department when they were sent to Latin America.¹⁴ For the new chiefs themselves, while their new posts represented a promotion, life there was not always easy and it is safe to assume that most of them did their best to prove themselves and be transferred to more desirable posts. This sentiment is implicit, at least, in a letter from Matthew Hanna, then U.S. minister to Nicaragua, to Whitehouse: wishing Whitehouse a good vacation, Hanna noted that: “if something better comes your way and you do not return, I will rejoice with you”.¹⁵

These men had led active social lives at the major metropolises of Europe, South America, and the United States so their transfer to cities like Tegucigalpa presented a significant change of pace. In a letter to Whitehouse, Lay complained that “as you can imagine there is no life in this place [Tegucigalpa], no congenial people...”. He asked Whitehouse if any of the European or Mexican diplomatic representatives in Guatemala would visit the inauguration of the new Honduran president so he could throw them a “stag diner” and have some “congenial people” to talk to.¹⁶ As for Whitehouse himself, *Time magazine* aptly described his promotion from counselor of embassy in Madrid to minister in Guatemala City as “a step up professionally, down socially”.¹⁷ The only comfort was that Guatemala City was relatively close to Whitehouse’s native Newport, NY, where the Minister owned a mansion “with castle like turrets and surrounded by a high wall” where he would entertain up to 50 diner guests at a time during the summers of his three year tenure in Guatemala.¹⁸ Likewise, Robbins was named the “social mentor” (later Chief of Protocol) of the Hoover administration during his tour to Salvador. He regularly left the legation in the care of his chargé for extended periods, while he returned to Washington “for the season”.¹⁹

An appreciation of the social backgrounds and diplomatic style of this generation of gentleman diplomats is vital for a thorough understanding of their encounter with Central America. These factors naturally influenced their views on the local social structure and how they thought they fit into it or at least how they positioned themselves in relation to it.

It is extremely difficult to reconstruct a complete picture of the ministers’ social and professional network in Central America, since they did not leave any personal papers

¹⁴ Irwin F. Gellman, *Good Neighbor diplomacy: United States policies in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Baltimore and London 1979) 3-4; “The Presidency: The Hoover Week”, *TM* (December 16, 1929).

¹⁵ Matthew Hanna (U.S. Minister to Nicaragua) to Whitehouse, June 1, 1932, PR Guatemala, Vol. 286, cl. 800: Nicaragua.

¹⁶ Julius G. Lay (U.S. Minister to Honduras) to Whitehouse, January 13, 1933, PR Guatemala, Vol. 295, cl. 800: Honduras.

¹⁷ “The Presidency: Practical idea”, *TM* (November 18, 1929).

¹⁸ “Sheldon Whitehouse dies at 82; Career Diplomat for 26 years”, *NYT* (August 7, 1965) 21; “Dudley P. Gilberts are Newport Hosts”, *NYT* (August 25, 1931) 18; “Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere”, *NYT* (July 25, 1932) 12; “Republican Chiefs Feted in Newport”, *NYT* (September 11, 1932) 29; “Newport Greets President’s Wife”, *NYT* (September 2, 1933) 15.

¹⁹ “Robbins dead; N.Y. rites set for U.S. envoy”, *TWP* (April 8, 1935) 1.

and diplomatic correspondence regularly omits the names of contacts and informants (probably for reasons of discretion and security, since the political reports were sent to Washington by airmail in plain text). Such information as there is does suggest, however, that as far as their political reporting was concerned, the U.S. ministers relied on a fairly small circle of acquaintances and contacts.²⁰ First of all, legation reports regularly mention conversations with “prominent American businessmen” as a source of information. And whenever the ministers discussed political matters with Central Americans, those tended to be their social or professional equals. The members of the government and military elite largely originated from the small local aristocracy and these were the people that U.S. diplomats met on an almost daily basis. The minister regularly mentioned the “better elements” or the local “society” in their reports and invariably sympathized with them.

When it comes to the diplomatic style of this generation of ministers, the outside world, at least, regarded them as the “striped pants” variant of diplomatist. The six discussed here certainly belonged to that group. These were distinguished gentlemen of the old school. Coming mostly from socially high-standing families and having mostly attended prestigious private schools and universities, these were men who were very much aware of their social eminence. They were accustomed to seek out their social peers and deal with diplomatic problems “forcefully” and “effectively”: by direct negotiations with the people who *mattered*. As a legation secretary of Caffery later recalled:

He [Caffery] realized that in any given community, (...) in any government, there are only a relatively small number of really powerful people; people who really call the signals and call the tunes. He always managed to establish a very, very close working relationship with such centers of power. That was his style. And when he wanted something done, when he wanted to persuade the government to go this way or that way, he would go quietly and talk it over with these people, whose respect he had already gained, and then he would persuade them. And more often than not, that government acted in a way that we considered constructive and responsible.²¹

During the early 1930s many American officers combined a low opinion of the majority of Central Americans with a patronizing attitude toward what was believed to be an “intelligent” minority. Among the “drunks”, “hot-heads”, “criminals”, “riff-raff”, “cut-throats”, communists, volatile banana-field laborers, and grafting politicians there were also those vaguely referred to as “the people”, “the intelligent voter”, or “the better element”. According to the American legations, this “better element” desired peace in the country’s national and international affairs, appreciated the importance of foreign capital and foreign political guidance, and abhorred radicalism. References to this vaguely

²⁰ For example: Personal Memorandum for the Minister, November 19, 1928, PR El Salvador, Vol. 106, cl. 844. A list of informers deemed reliable by the legation. Mainly businessmen, landowners, and foreigners.

²¹ “Interview with Robert Corrigan January 21, 1988”, *Frontline Diplomacy: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, CD-Rom: Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands (henceforth: ADST). Also see: Gellman, *Good Neighbor diplomacy*, 16.

progressive, though unidentified, constituency in Honduras, for example, were often used in the political reports: The legation believed, for example, that “the better people of both [political] parties” in Honduras wanted to live at peace with their neighbor Guatemala. Contrasting several radical, anti-American candidates for the congressional elections of 1930 to two more conservative and capable men, Lay insisted that “[b]oth these [latter] candidates have the respect of the intelligent voters of the capital and the general feeling here is that, if there is really a free election, they will be elected”. Lay also believed that “the people realize that if it were not for American capital to develop the banana industry, Honduras would become a wilderness”. On the subject of foreign intervention, the Minister noted that “Hondurans on the North coast have the most pleasant and friendly recollections of the visits of our Marines to this country, especially in 1924”.²²

The relationship with the Central American elite was not unambiguous however. In many ways, the elitist outlook of American diplomats and of the Central American aristocracy seemed perfectly compatible: both admired the ways of European high society and were keen on imitating its outer forms and both were comfortable with the idea of elite rule. The Salvadoran and Guatemalan coffee barons and the Honduran rangers and plantation owners who constituted the local social and economic elites frequented golf clubs and joined European style gentlemen’s clubs; they followed Old World fashion and lived in French or Italian style mansions; they sent their children to European and American schools; a light skin and Spanish aristocratic heritage were highly prized. American diplomats socialized with the native elite at local country clubs like they would in any European capital. They also agreed with the aristocracy that it was entirely appropriate that they should have the land that the Indian masses were too indulgent to cultivate.²³ Yet, an undertone of patronizing contemptuousness marked the American attitude toward the Central American ruling elite.

Hidden away somewhat in the State Department “Lot Files” is a concise report on Salvadoran society and politics by Cornelius van H. Engert, who was a first secretary of legation in that country from 1925 to 1926.²⁴ Somewhat of a rarity among the diplomatic

²² Lawrence Higgins (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to Honduras) to Whitehouse, June 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 102, November 2, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol. 170, cl. 800: Political Conditions; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 399, February 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 187, cl. 800: Communism; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 597, August 17, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to Thomas C. Wasson (U.S. Vice Consul to Puerto Cortes, Honduras), March 11, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

²³ For good discussions of the worldview of Central American elites, consult: Samuel Z. Stone, *The Heritage of the Conquistadors. Ruling Classes in Central America from the Conquest to the Sandinistas* (Lincoln and London 1990); David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford, CA, 1994); Cerdas Cruz, “Colonial Heritage”, in: Goodman et al., *Political Parties*; Jeffrey M. Paige, *Coffee and Power. Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, Mass., and London 1997) 120-126; Gould and Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness*, 8-16.

²⁴ Cornelius H. van Engert, El Salvador, National Archives of the United States, College Park, MD, Record Group 59: Department of State Lot Files, Studies on Latin America, Box 12, Folder marked Salvador by Cornelius van H. Engert.

archives of the time, it offers a complete and integral study of Central American society by a U.S. diplomat and provides the clue to understanding the American position toward the local ruling classes. Engert rightly observes that the ideology of the local elite was strongly based on the concept of racial superiority over the Indian. While the secretary did not have a problem with that ideology as such, he did dispute that the Salvadoran elite's claim to whiteness and European heritage put it on the same level as the American elite: No matter how "white" the local aristocrat might be he was not an Anglo-Saxon. While the Spanish colonist, much like the American frontiersman, prided himself on his toughness and independence and considered it entirely natural that he should claim the land that the native Indian had never bothered to develop, the North American would not recognize this accomplishment. Rather than a southern version of the North American "self-made man", Engert asserts that the "presence of [a] large Indian population" had the effect of lowering the standards of the ruling classes "by enabling them to live upon the toil of inferiors without doing any work themselves". Combined with the racial intermingling with Indians, this lack of honest physical labor over time led to a degeneration of the upper classes, which "lost much of their energy and resourcefulness".

It is striking that while Engert's analysis of the Mestizo and Indian classes is largely an abstract treatise, couched in what was at the time regarded as scientific language²⁵, his reflections on the upper class seem very personal and are particularly venomous. Being the only class with which the secretary had any personal contact, he was clearly unable to dress a profound culture shock in neat, academic generalities. And so, Engert devotes six of fourteen pages of the introduction of his report on a diatribe against the Salvadoran aristocracy, which is laced with unfavorable comparisons to alleged Anglo-Saxon traits and customs:

From their Spanish ancestors, the upper classes have inherited vivacity of intellect, courage, and courtesy. Unfortunately, however, their intellect is apt to take the form of superficial cleverness rather than wisdom, common sense, or foresight; their courage becomes visionary audacity which causes them to attempt much more than they can accomplish and to start things they cannot possibly finish; while their courtesy loses itself in a maze of polite but artificial formalities and ceremonies, and they are often ignorant of the simplest rules of good breeding (...)

The Spaniards were too impulsive, emotional, and excitable to hold deep convictions or to be sincerely attached to a cause or an ideal. Hence the lack of definiteness of aim, an absence of a sense of responsibility, and a

²⁵ Such is evident, for example, in Engert's attention for history and geography, which betray some erudition on these subjects. More striking to the modern reader would be his references to physical anthropology or so-called craniometry. He observed, for instance that the eyes of the Indian had a "Mongoloid tilt" and that the shape of their heads was "brachycephalic" (i.e. round and flat, as opposed to the allegedly long and thin skulls of the Caucasian races). Engert associated such features with impaired mental faculties. In all fairness, however, it must be noted that such observations were balanced with more realistic—though no less paternalistic—reflections on the social-economic circumstances of the Indians: "no sincere effort was ever made to raise them economically or educationally and to offer them opportunities for improvement".

disposition to shirk drudgery. A momentary enthusiasm is easily aroused but is as quickly followed by disillusionment at the sight of the first obstacles.

This naïve impressionability is probably also responsible for their love of sonorous phrases. Eloquence comes so easy to them as to be almost a nuisance. Impassionate oratory and theatrical pathos seem to take the place of sound reasoning and calm reflection. And as one listens to their speeches—full of classical quotations, circumlocutions, and repetitions—one cannot help but feel that they talk faster than they think (...)

Another characteristic is love of display. Their extravagance at feasts and festivals contrasts oddly with the parsimony of their daily life. Showiness, rather than thoroughness, seems to be the aim (...) The same is true of their somewhat overrated hospitality. The joys of simple and unostentatious entertaining are unknown to them. Every party must be either a *fiesta* or a *banquete*.

Engert reserved similar contempt for the upper middle cases of politicians, military officers, and administrators, which were even less Anglo-Saxon than the landowners. This class, which tended to the practical affairs that the aristocracy could not be bothered with, was mainly Mestizo or Ladino, a “mongrel” race of Spanish and Indian ancestry. In fact, Engert seems to have preferred the Indian of “pure blood” whose biggest fault was the lack of thrift, but, being a “natural” race, had no serious defects. The Ladinos, by contrast, were “more cowardly, less honest, lazier, and more sensuous than the pure Indian” and were prone to heavy drinking and gambling. However, since the locals shared a “curious” tolerance of interbreeding, Engert observed that the Mestizo would eventually dominate Central America and comforted himself with the thought that, although they “lose some mental and moral qualities of the superior race”, they are at least “a step ahead of the Indian”. The improvement that Engert recognized was not so much in what he might have called the “moral” realm, as he rather appreciated the alleged docility of the Indian, but rather in the Mestizo’s inheritance of some of the white man’s ambition and foresight. Thus, “the Mestizo realizes that he can rise from the masses by his own efforts and thus makes him more purposeful and intent on accomplishment”. These inbred characteristics had created a middle class of Mestizo clerks, teachers, professionals, politicians, and soldiers: Professions that were frowned upon by the white upper classes but were mentally excessively demanding for the Indians. That such an overlap of racial and social hierarchy should be desirable, can be concluded from Engert’s assertion that the Mestizos “form a useful link between the ‘aristocrats’ and the peons, who therefore understand each other much better than the same elements in neighboring countries were the middle class is not so large”.

The sentiments expressed by Engert explain the American diplomatic corps’ attitude toward the “White” coffee barons and “Ladino” political rulers: the American minister mingled with them at social occasions and accepted as natural their rule of the Indian masses, but at the same time, he was superior to them. The minister took his place among the ruling classes of Central American as he would in any European capital, but he did not consider himself *part* of that group. Thus, men like Whitehouse and Lay adopted a patronizing attitude towards the affairs of Central America such as they would

not adopt towards the affairs of Europe. They easily assumed that they had to lead the local leadership.

Taking some steps down on the social ladder, American ministers understood the local Indian populations to be essentially peaceful, if not passive, people. They lacked the mental capacities to comprehend political ideas or ideologies and concurrently, were not dissatisfied with their lack of political influence. If only enough land or food was available for the masses to survive, they would endure the basically feudal system under which they had toiled for many generations. Thus, according to Whitehouse, Guatemalans were a “very submissive people who are not easily incited to revolt”. Apparently lacking its own political agency, the people would need “strong men” to lead an uprising and, happily, such men did not currently exist in Guatemala. In El Salvador, legation officials agreed that the so-called *mozo* (Indian peasant) did not desire change. While a measure of social unrest was always evident, it was not serious. The legation considered that work was always obtainable in industrious, intensely cultivated Salvador. And even those who could not find work should be able to live off the land. Minister Robbins reported in 1931 that:

Unemployment has this characteristic in Salvador, namely, that nobody need go hungry for it is easily possible to live on the country without money. Furthermore, there is no excuse for much unemployment here. One of the leading coffee-growers, Mr. James Hill, has informed me that he now requires 200 additional hands on his properties and is unable to obtain them.

Thus, unemployment, hunger, and poverty were caused, according to Robbins and others, by “a want of desire to work”, and not by any social inequalities or economic problems.²⁶

Only Lay and the Honduran legation were somewhat more pessimistic about the essentially peaceful nature of the local masses of peasants. In fact, Hondurans, who were poorer, less obviously Hispanic, and more obviously Indian than people in the neighboring republics, were considered especially backward, hot-headed, prone to heavy drinking, and intellectually impaired: “[T]hey are naturally very credulous, having little critical faculty in their mental composition. When something is told them, they do not stop to ask themselves if it is plausible, reasonable or consistent with facts known to them, but as a rule accept the story in its entirety until denied or refuted”. Hondurans were therefore easily excited, not because there was any reason to be, but because they lacked the ability for sober reflection. For example, first secretary Higgins more than once complained that Hondurans were led into a patriotic frenzy against Guatemala, because of wild and unfounded rumors about president’s Ubico’s designs for Central American domination: “These allegations, fomented by the press and falling on the fertile

²⁶ William McCafferty (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 218, November 13, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, #1020); W.W. Scott (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 236, March 22, 1930, PR El Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: Bolshevism; Harold D. Finley (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 490, May 2, 1931, PR El Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Guatemala; Warren D. Robbins (U.S. Minister to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 468, March 21, 1931, PR El Salvador, Vol. 112, cl. 800.B: Bolshevism.

soil of the medieval mind of the Hondurans, so prone to distrust and hatred of the foreigner, particularly when he is a neighbor and hereditary enemy, are on everyone's tongue and sincerely believed by many".²⁷

Lay himself believed that the Honduran Indian was a "very low type of Indian" and the attribute that was invariably ascribed to them was vindictiveness. When this trait was combined with easily available liquor, a dangerous situation developed: "The average Honduran", noted vice-consul Stewart, "is fairly good-natured until he gets drunk and then he sometimes runs wild and resents any real or fancied insult with revolver or machete". Whenever the American fruit companies had to lay off large groups of workers, they preferred to fire the Jamaican Negro laborers, because they were supposedly more peaceful and less prone to drinking than their Honduran counterparts. The legation agreed that this was a good way to prevent disturbances.²⁸

During the early Depression years, however, it was inevitable that the Indian masses would be touched by the economic letdown and this worried the American legations. Whitehouse feared that hunger and unemployment would cause Guatemalans to "join *any* movement which may promise to improve their condition". In fact, it seems likely that Whitehouse did not just have "any" movement in mind, but the recently founded *Partido Cooperatista*. This party, Whitehouse claimed, was mainly made up of the "younger elements" of existing parties who objected to the current government's inefficiency. While the Party's appeals to the laboring and agrarian classes were voiced in "high sounding phrases", the Minister seemed to agree with "many people" who believed that its proclamations were "nothing more than an effort to encourage radicalism and communism".²⁹

It is this last issue that Whitehouse mentioned that worried him and his colleagues: not that the Indian masses would become a political force in themselves—as they were peaceful and did not desire change anyway—but that devious elements among the Mestizos or Creoles would take advantage of the Indians' unemployment and general credulity. Due to the Depression many Honduran peasants and plantation workers, for example, faced the prospect of losing their land or their jobs. The American legation feared that large groups of Hondurans who had nothing to loose were prone to pillaging and burning, especially when opportunistic politicians or other "professional troublemakers" incited them. Such was the pretext for many "revolutions" in Honduras,

²⁷ Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 504, June 10, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 535, June 28, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 192, cl. 891: Public Press.

²⁸ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 731, March 3, 1933, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 218; Higgins to the Department of State, Despatch 332, November 11, 1931, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 216; Lay to the Department of State, Despatch 704, January 27, 1933, PR Honduras, Vol. 195, cl. 715: Honduras-Guatemala; Warren C. Stewart (U.S. Vice Consul to Ceiba, Honduras) to Higgins, November 26, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol 172, cl. 850.4: Labor Strikes; Thomas C. Wasson (U.S. Vice Consul to Puerto Cortes, Honduras) to Lay, November 17, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol 172, cl. 850.4: Labor Strikes; T. Monroe Fisher (U.S. Vice Consul to Tela, Honduras) to Lay, November 20, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol 172, cl. 850.4: Labor Strikes; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 141, November 21, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol 172, cl. 850.4: Labor Strikes.

²⁹ McCafferty to the Secretary of State, November 13, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, #1020).

the Americans believed. In a typical example, Lay warned the North Coast consulates in the autumn of 1930 that “this Legation is informed that unemployment on the North Coast during the past few months has greatly increased and that many desperate men out of work have recently been responsible for murders and outrages”.³⁰

In El Salvador, the *mozos*’ natural incapacity to grasp political concepts or even to form any kind of public opinion, the lack of unemployment and absence of any “need” to go hungry, implied that Salvador’s backward society was naturally insulated against modern political radicalism. While the existence of communism in El Salvador was acknowledged and taken seriously by the legation, there is no evidence that it was considered a force capable of effecting any social or political change as it had been in Mexico some years previous. Instead, it was communism’s potential for disorder, murder, rape, pillage, and destruction that was feared. However, communism was containable as it could only flourish when artificially implanted and cultivated by foreign agitators. As long as responsible army and police officers were willing to take “prompt and decisive action” against foreign elements, communism would not spread since the *mozos* were “not of the character to embrace Communism whole-heartedly”.³¹

The fear for “Communism”, or any other kind of “radicalism”, at the American legations at this particular time should not be confused, therefore, with that which developed during the Cold War. communism was not defined, for example, as a global conspiracy directed by Moscow. Terms like “fifth column movement”, “totalitarian threat”, or “monolithic organization” had not entered the vocabulary yet. communist agitators were mainly described as opportunists whose only incentive was to still their thirst for blood. Hence, isolated “communistic” uprisings were not understood to be a direct political threat in the sense that their objectives were to overthrow the government and install a Bolshevik dictatorship. The objective was to “pillage and burn”. However, the unrest and financial drain accompanying a communist uprising could pose a significant threat to political stability.³²

Since any unrest among the *campesinos* was thought to have been caused by a discreet and limited group of (foreign) agitators, it could be controlled fairly easily.

³⁰ Lay to the U.S. Consulates on the Honduran North Coast, November 13, 1930, PR Honduras, PR Honduras, Vol 172, cl. 850.4: Labor Strikes; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 286, September 10, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol 179, cl. 800: Honduras (Continued); Stewart to Lay, October 20, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol. 170, cl. 800: Political Conditions; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 125, December 19, 1930, PR Honduras, Vol. 170, cl. 800: Political Conditions; Stewart to Lay, April 8, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras (Telegrams); Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 63, April 19, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras (Telegrams).

³¹ Scott to the Secretary of State, Despatch 236, March 22, 1930, PR El Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: Bolshevism; Scott to the Secretary of State, Despatch 319, August 1, 1930, PR El Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: Bolshevism.

³² Local elites seem to have had a very similar understanding of what communism was: Héctor Lindo Fuentes et al., *Remembering a massacre in El Salvador: The insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the politics of historical memory* (Albuquerque 2007) 46, argues that Salvadoran elites in the 1930s did not have a well-developed idea of what communism was and used the term “communist” according “to the parlance of the day, when the word meant someone who was violent, immoral, against the law, contrary to the nation state, or lacking in Christianity”.

Government repression of strikes or other stirrings was deemed appropriate by the American legations. What was needed was “firm” or “purposeful” action by the government, untainted by “opportunistic” attempts to woo the labor vote. An interesting sidelight on this notion is that American officers often conceptualized a “firm” stand on labor in gender terms. Thus, former president Paz Barahona of Honduras, despite his democratic credentials, was considered an “old woman” in this regard. A local *comandante* on the North Coast of that same country who had wavered in his response to labor unrest was said to be lacking “manly” qualities. Americans defined leadership over the masses in *macho* terms. While there is no indication that they were looking for anything like a dictator, they never considered that the line between manliness and despotism might be very thin indeed.³³

2. THE ROOSEVELT APPOINTEES, 1935-1945

One might argue that inter-American policy was the least of Roosevelt’s worries. His administration is best known for its handling of the Great Depression and its confrontation with fascism in Europe. Yet, inter-American policy played an important role in both these endeavors and Roosevelt is also remembered for his Good Neighbor policy, which has been classified an enormous success by many (but by no means all) American historians.³⁴

The Good Neighbor policy was a multifaceted attempt to win the trust and respect of America’s Latin American neighbors. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, American policy towards the south was characterized by unilateral military intervention and unbridled economic expansion, thus fostering the growth of anti-American sentiment in the so-called “sister republics”. By the time Franklin Roosevelt entered the White House, the state of U.S. Latin American relations was thought to be at an all-time low. The new administration made valiant attempts to change this situation: It used a new official discourse that stressed mutual respect and inter-American solidarity and moved on to proclaim officially that the United States would never again violate the sovereignty of the Latin American republics. The marine contingents that occupied Nicaragua were withdrawn; the infamous Platt amendment of the Cuban constitution was abrogated; and the Central American Treaty of Peace and Amity, which had often been used as a justification for U.S. interference, was quietly shelved. As a reward, and as a measure of the success of the Good Neighbor policy, nearly all nations of the Western Hemisphere warmly supported the United States during the Second World War.³⁵

The Roosevelt administration felt that the appointment of envoys to the sister republics required extra care in the context of its Good Neighbor policy. It was not

³³ Higgins, Notes on the Political Campaign in Honduras in 1923, n.d., PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Henry S. Haines (U.S. Vice Consul to Puerto Castilla, Honduras) to Lay, August 19, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol 179, cl. 800: Honduras (Continued).

³⁴ See chapter 5, footnotes 6 and 7.

³⁵ The classic account of the Good Neighbor policy is: Wood, *The Making*. Many other works cited throughout the current text will provide insights into the specifics of the Good Neighbor policy.

altogether satisfied with the state of the diplomatic corps when it took office. It proved to be difficult to find Foreign Service officers of the senior ranks who had not been tinged by the Republican patronage machine. At least with regard to Central America, Whitehouse, Curtis, Lay, and Hanna were all thought to be partisans of the Republican Party to some degree. Only Jefferson Caffery and Warren Delano Robbins—a first cousin of the new president as his middle name indicates—were not associated with the Republicans. The former had many years of active service ahead of him, serving, among other posts, in Cuba. The latter was promoted to Canada, but died unexpectedly of pneumonia in 1935. Whitehouse took charge in Columbia in 1933, but soon left the service for “family reasons”. Curtis had already been retired involuntarily. Lay left Honduras in 1935. He was considered “dead wood” by the incoming administration, but was eventually transferred to Uruguay, where he could serve out two more years in order to obtain full retirement benefits.³⁶

Whether it was due to the large amount of Republican protégés in the Service; the landslide election victory of 1936; the insistent plea for diplomatic perks from Roosevelt supporters; or even an attempt to give a personal touch to the Good Neighbor policy, the fact remains that from 1936 onward Democratic political appointees took over the Central American posts. Francis Patrick Corrigan, a Democrat from New York, was appointed to El Salvador in 1934; Fay Allen Des Portes of North Carolina was appointed to Guatemala in 1936; John Draper Erwin of Tennessee was appointed to Honduras in 1937. Des Portes was replaced in 1943 by Boaz W. Long of New Mexico who was himself replaced by Edwin J. Kyle of Texas in 1945. The only career men to serve in Central America (including Nicaragua and Costa Rica) before the outbreak of the War were Leo Keena (Honduras, 1935-1937) and Robert Frazer (El Salvador, 1937-1942). From 1941 onwards, the Central American posts were slowly recovered for the professional service.³⁷

³⁶ William C. Bullit to R. Walton Moore, December 8, 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt Office Files. Part III Departmental Correspondence. Microfilm: Roosevelt Study Center (henceforth: ROF), Reel 24, Frames 727-730; Franklin Roosevelt to the Acting Secretary of State, December 28, 1936, ROF, Reel 24, Frame 731; Franklin Roosevelt to the Acting Secretary of State, December 19, 1936, Reel 24, Frame 735; Memorandum for Judge Moore, December 19, 1936, ROF, Reel 24, Frames 736-737 ; Unmarked files (ca. 1933), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Papers, Official File 20: State Department, February to June, 1933; Unmarked files (Long to Hull, February, 1933), Elisha V. and Boaz W. Long Papers, Box 44, folder 109: Analysis of incumbents in Diplomatic Service, 1933; Interview with James Cowles Hart Bonright (February 26, 1986) ADST; Whitehouse to Franklin Roosevelt, November 19, 1934, FDR Library, OF729: Sheldon Whitehouse, 1933-1938. On Curtis' final weeks in the service, see chapter 3, pages 102-109. He seems to have retreated from public life after his retirement and does not turn up in the newspapers anymore.

³⁷ *Register* (1941) 107; *Register* (1942) 147, 179-180, and 192; *Register* (1946) 218; *Register* (1948) 291; *Register* (1950) 110. Incidentally, the diary of Leo Keena's wife, Mrs. Joan S. Keena, was published in 1985. Regretfully, the diary is rather bland and deals mostly with the management of a legation household (although it is not particularly insightful or interesting on that count either). The addendum by Keena's daughter, Ms. Manuela Keena, presents a far more interesting read, but does not deal with Foreign Service life. Joan S. Keena, *On the Foreign Service merry-go-round* (Elms Court et al. 1985).

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
19-			
'30	● Sheldon Whitehouse 03-21-'30 / 07-23-'33		● Julius Lay 05-31-'30 / 03-17-'35
'31		● Charles Curtis 05-06-'52 / 05-21-'53	
'32			
'33	● Matthew Hanna 10-28-'33 / 02-09-'36		
'34		● Frank Corrigan 04-30-'34 / 08-28-'37	
'35			● Leo Keena 07-19-'35 / 05-01-'37
'36	● Fay Des Portes 05-22-'36 / 05-14-'43		
'37		● Robert Frazer 12-06-'37 / 10-31-'42	● John Erwin 09-08-'37 / 04-16-'47
'38			
'39			
'40			
'41			
'42		● Walter Thurston 01-14-'42 / 10-14-'44	
'43	● Boaz Long 05-19-'43 / 04-11-'45		
'44			
'45	● Edwin Kyle 05-08-'45 / 08-22-'48	● John Simmons 02-21-'45 / 07-01-47	
'46			
'47			● Paul Daniels 06-23-'47 / 30-10-'47
'48		● Albert Nufer 08-13-'47 / 07-16-'49	● Herbert Bursley 05-15-'48 / 12-12-'50
'49	● Richard Patterson 11-24-'48 / 03-28-'50		
'50		● George Shaw 08-23-'49 / 04-25-'52	
'51	● Rudolf Schoenfeld 04-24-'51 / 10-19-'54		● John Erwin 03-14-'51 / 02-28-'54
'52		● Angier Duke 05-06-'52 / 05-21-'53	

Aside from a difference in geographical origins—with greater emphasis on the South and the West rather than the North and East—the new Roosevelt appointees differed considerably from their predecessors at the Central American posts. Generally, the appointees were not from old, upper-class families; they had not enjoyed Ivy League or even university educations; and they lacked experience in professional diplomacy. Before they became diplomats, these men had had careers in business or the professions: Corrigan was a surgeon, Des Porters a politician, businessman, and farmer, Long a businessman, Erwin a journalist, and Kyle a scholar. What united them, of course, was their connection with the Democratic Party. None of the new ministers to Central America played a particularly important role in the Democratic Party, nor were they particularly close to members of the Roosevelt administration. Their political connections and their records as life-long supporters of the Democratic Party did, however, lead to their appointment to the Foreign Service.

One interesting sidelight to these appointments should be mentioned: Des Portes, Erwin, and Kyle were from the traditional South. Long was from New Mexico. Corrigan, Keena, and Frazer were from the Northern states, but, as their names indicate, they were all of Irish stock. While it is unknown whether this played any part in their appointments to Central America specifically, the idea that Irishmen and Southerners would get along better with Latins appears to have been a common stereotype. The former were considered friendlier and less ostentatious than the formal and reserved Anglo Saxon type and thus better able to deal with the extravagant Latins. According to the Division of Latin American Affairs, the field posts needed men who took an interest in Latin culture and spoke Spanish; men who were progressive and forward-looking and sympathized with the region's social and economic problems; men of independence and tact who had the courage needed to withstand the many pressures that might draw the United States into local politics. Lastly, Latin American duty demanded the "ability to get along with peoples whose customs, mentality and background often differ quite radically from our own". According to the Division, men "with some Irish blood often meet this requirement as do Southerners who have no color prejudices".³⁸

As to the professional backgrounds of the Roosevelt appointees, one can debate at length the merits of appointing politicians to the highest diplomatic posts abroad. The fact remains, as will become clear in the following chapters, that years of experience in foreign relations do not necessarily result in sound diplomacy. And from the standpoint of the Roosevelt administration, there were some advantages to the appointment of non-career men. The very lack of experience of these men in American foreign relations was an asset in so far as they were untainted by Republican policies. It seems probable that

³⁸ Trueblood, Memorandum on Qualifications of Officers specializing in Latin American Service, December 15, 1937, Lot Files, General Memoranda, Box 2, Folder marked General, Oct-Dec, 1937. Incidentally, secretary Drew commented on Keena that: "He is a very nice person—quiet, unruffable, sense of humor. Being of Irish extraction he would be". And on Corrigan he noted: "Am I prejudiced or back-patting or is there something about the Irish? They always seem to be smarter than other people and to have 'a way with them'. You either hate them or love them". Correspondence and early diary entries of Gerald A. Drew, 1919-1970, ADST.

many of these men were unfamiliar with the 1923 Treaty or the promotion of constitutionalism and they never mentioned gunboats or marines. Also unfamiliar with protocol and diplomatic etiquettes, their approach to legation affairs appears to have been relatively informal and they were more willing to engage the local press—an attitude conformant with the spirit of the Good Neighbor.

Under normal circumstances, most chiefs of mission served at a single post for around three years. The ministers who were appointed to Central America around 1936, however, served an average of just over five years at their isthmian posts. Those appointed to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (i.e. Des Portes, Frazer, and Erwin) served an average of over seven years at these posts. Why this was so has apparently not been documented, although it is reasonable to assume that toward 1939 it was deemed desirable to have envoys in Central America who had already established a satisfactory working relationship with the local governments and who could be trusted to gain Central American cooperation for the U.S. policy of neutrality and, two years later, for the American war effort. However this may be, it can safely be said that due to their long tenures, the Roosevelt appointees played an important role in the development of U.S.-Central American relations. While some of their life-histories will necessarily be discussed in the context of chapters to come, an illustrative discussion of the first three appointees to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras follows below.

Francis Patrick Corrigan was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1881. At the age of 25, he graduated from the local Western Reserve University with a medical degree. After that he went into surgery, which would be his vocation for the next twenty-eight years. He was a successful surgeon too: Some career highlights include his participation in the first successful blood transfusion in the United States; graduate work in Europe; and several official missions to Latin America intended to improve health care there. During the 1920's Corrigan served as director of surgery at several hospitals, but toward the end of the decade, he felt that it was time for a career change. By his own account, Corrigan had always wanted to join the diplomatic service and since, again by his own account, he was a life-long Democrat, he felt that Roosevelt's election presented the right opportunity for him to enter that line of work.³⁹

There was no obvious reason for the new administration to be interested in Corrigan—at least there is no known record of important political work or campaign contributions from his side. It appears that he won his appointment to the legation of El Salvador in 1935 by single-minded determination. Corrigan's personal papers at the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, NY, document his personal campaign for a diplomatic post. The genial Irishman seems to have been acquainted with many people and he was definitely not shy about contacting them and recruiting them for his cause.

³⁹ “Dr. Frank Corrigan Dies at 86; Retired Surgeon and Diplomat”, *NYT* (January 23, 1968) 39; Corrigan to Senator Robert J. Bulkley, January 17, 1933, Folder: Bulkley, sen. Robert J., General Correspondence, Box 2, Papers of Frank P. Corrigan, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

Characteristically, he introduced himself to Robert Bulkley, Senator for Ohio at the time, by stating outright that “I am submitting my name [for appointment to a diplomatic post] only because I feel that by temperament, training and type of mind I might be of considerable and valuable use to President Roosevelt’s administration”.⁴⁰

Corrigan managed to convince many people in his personal network to back his campaign, but the administration’s initial answer was “no chance”. Corrigan kept at it, however, and, with Senator Bulkley and a small army of reputable Americans firmly by his side, his efforts were rewarded with the appointment to El Salvador. The only problem was that Corrigan had been aiming at least for Ecuador or one of the larger Latin American countries. Thus, a campaign for promotion was almost immediately initialized, with new letters of introduction and self-promotion going out to everyone who could help him. While he seems to have been aiming for a position as assistant secretary in the Department of State, Corrigan’s connections were not that good.⁴¹ However, he did have a fairly successful career in diplomacy, which eventually included several ambassadorships and which extended into the postwar era.

Though given to flattery somewhat, one cannot help but respect Corrigan for his strong and unapologetic sense of self-worth. It seems that he did not entirely overestimate his own abilities either: He quickly earned the respect of his secretaries at the Salvadoran legation—and it was never easy for a political appointee to win the favor of the younger career men—and Franklin Roosevelt reportedly considered him the best man to come into the service from the outside.⁴²

Fay Allen Des Portes, born on June 16, 1890, in Winnsboro, SC, was probably the son of an independent farmer or small plantation owner. He was educated at Clemson College and North Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical College, classified at the time as a school for the “industrial classes”. After graduation, Fay went into business in Winnsboro, trying his luck at merchandising, chemical production, and banking. He also owned a farm in his native Fairfield, which employed up to 400 black workers. From 1926 to 1928, he served the Democratic Party in the South Carolina House of Representatives and subsequently in the South Carolina Senate from 1928 to 1933 (both houses had been dominated by Democrats since the end of Reconstruction). On a national level, Fay Des Portes drew some minor attention because of his stance against

⁴⁰ Corrigan to Bulkley, January 17, 1933, Folder: Bulkley, Sen. Robert J., General Correspondence, Box 2, Corrigan Papers.

⁴¹ Patrick J. Cooney to James A. Farley, October 5, 1933, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 4, Folder: Farley, James A.; Farley to Cooney, October 18, 1933, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 4, Folder: Farley, James A.; R. Walton Moore to Corrigan, December 19, 1936, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 7, Folder: Moore, R. Walton; Corrigan to Hull, March 20, 1937, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 4, Folder: Hull, Cordell; Sumner Welles to Corrigan, June 4, 1937, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 10, Folder: Welles, Sumner.

⁴² Bulkley to Corrigan, June 3, 1937, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 2, Folder: Bulkley, Sen. Robert J..

prohibition and because he was a delegate to the 1932 Democratic National Convention, which nominated Franklin Roosevelt as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate.⁴³

The Great Depression hit the Des Portes family hard, however. Life on the family's farm was almost unbearable as Fay explained in a 1931 letter to his favorite cousin:

"[t]he horrible part of the whole situation is these poor starving people here in our midst. The Banks can't let the poor Negroes on the farm have anything to eat. I don't know what is going to happen. I have about four hundred Negroes that are absolutely dependent on me as my two little boys but I can't help them any more and God only knows what is going to happen to them. And what is happening to me is happening with every other farmer and landowner in the state".⁴⁴

Fay's health apparently broke under the strain of these economic difficulties, and he was committed to a sanitarium in the fall of 1932.

It so happened, though, that the cousin Fay wrote to was the highly successful New York financier Bernard Baruch, who had close ties to the incoming Roosevelt administration. In 1933, Baruch, "in one of the rare instances he ever exerted influence in personal patronage", wrote a letter to James Farley, Roosevelt's former campaign leader who was virtually in control of the Democratic Party's patronage machine, to advertise the abilities of his cousin Fay. FDR himself seems to have taken an interest in the case and was "delighted" to help out "Barney's" cousin. Bernard Baruch's biographer opines that "[w]hat happened was like the ending of a Fairy Tale. For Fay Allen Des Portes, a South Carolinian with something of the charm of his more famous kinsman, was whisked away from a dying cotton plantation to the genial climate and cultured official society of the Republic of Bolivia", where he became the American chargé d'affaires.⁴⁵ Some years later he was transferred to Guatemala to head his own mission.

John Draper Erwin was born in Meador, Kentucky, on November 14, 1883. Next to nothing is known about his family, except that it had moved from Meador to Chattanooga, Tennessee—a major railway hub with some industries—when Erwin was still a little boy. One can speculate that his father was somehow involved in the railway industry, where John Erwin would also find his first employ. Young Erwin attended the local McCallie Prep School for some time and then switched to Baylor, also a pre-university school, where he graduated in 1908. In 1909, he joined the staff of the *Chattanooga News* as a reporter, which turned out to be his true calling in life.⁴⁶

Erwin was a lifelong Democrat and in 1913 he temporarily left journalism and moved to Washington D.C. to work for the Democratic Tennessee Senatorial delegation. He started out as a staff member of Senator John K. Shields but soon switched to the staff of Senator Luke Lea. Lea was a staunch supporter of President Wilson's Progressive policies and, during the years that Erwin was in his service, he devoted

⁴³ *Register* (1941) 107; "Fay A. Des Portes; U.S. Ambassador", *NYT* (September 18, 1944) 19.

⁴⁴ Margaret L. Coit, *Mr. Baruch* (Reprint: Washington D.C. 2000) 400.

⁴⁵ *Idem*.

⁴⁶ *Register* (1946) 218; "J.D. Erwin Dies; Aided 'Dome' Probe", *The Hartford Courant* (March 3, 1983) C12.

most of his energies to launching a federal investigation of the railroads and of political corruption in Tennessee.⁴⁷

Erwin's decision to move to Washington, his home for the next 25 years, proved to be of major importance for his further career. After some five years on Senator Lea's staff, he went back into journalism, as a Washington reporter for *The Nashville Tennessean* (which, as it happened, had been founded by Lea). During the next twenty years, he would also be connected with the Pulitzer brothers' *New York World* and the Memphis based *Commercial Appeal*. Perhaps as a result of his work for Lea, Erwin's major interest as a correspondent was political corruption. During the 1920s, he acquired some modest fame for his reporting on the Teapot Dome Scandal—arguably the United States' biggest political scandal until Watergate. Together with a young attorney called Harry Slatterly, Erwin provided the Senate committee that studied the fraud case with leads that would eventually result in the arrest and imprisonment of Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall.⁴⁸

Despite his successful muckraking, Erwin was not exactly a national figure, but he was quite well-known in his own state as a member of the *Tennessean* press corps and as a former assistant to *Tennessean* Senators. It was particularly fortunate, in his case, that Roosevelt's secretary of state, Cordell Hull, was also a *Tennessean* and something of an acquaintance of him. In 1937, with the support of the Tennessee delegation and at the insistence of Hull, Erwin was appointed minister to Honduras, his home for the next ten years.⁴⁹

The political appointees took widely different experiences, talents, and ideas ("idiosyncrasies" is a better term in some cases) to their new jobs as diplomats. Every one of them seems to have been keen to use some of that special talent to distinguish themselves from their peers in the professional service. Corrigan was always happy to apply his medical training. His initiatives along these lines ranged from personally pulling the bad teeth of his young secretaries to elaborating plans to improve the health of Foreign Service officers or sanitary conditions in the countries where he was posted.⁵⁰ Erwin, the muckraking journalist, was very sensitive to signs of official corruption and he was initially quite overwhelmed by what he perceived to be the abundant fraud and nepotism in Honduras.⁵¹ Des Portes was eager to sniff out Nazi sympathizers—though

⁴⁷ "Senator Kenneth McKellar to President Truman, February 11, 1949" (Truman Papers – OF 1002); "J.D. Erwin", *THC*; "John Erwin, Ex-Envoy from U.S. to Honduras", *NYT* (March 3, 1983) D19.

⁴⁸ "J.D. Erwin", *THC*; "John Erwin", *NYT*; "J. Erwin, 99; helped break Teapot Dome", *Chicago Tribune* (March 2, 1983) A6.

⁴⁹ "J.D. Erwin", *THC*; "Interview with Randolph Clough", *ADST*; "McIntyre to Roosevelt, n.d." (FDR Papers – OF 193b).

⁵⁰ Correspondence and early diary entries of Gerald A. Drew, 1919-1970, *ADST*; Corrigan to Moore, October 30, 1936, Corrigan Papers, Box 7, Folder: Moore, R. Walton.

⁵¹ See Chapter 5, pages 168-170.

he was not entirely out of step with his contemporaries in this regard.⁵² The fact that his mother's family was Jewish (hence the Baruch connection) *might* have something to do with this. Kyle, the educator and agriculturalist, was "anxious to cooperate with the Government and the people of Guatemala in the development of their natural resources which are largely agricultural and in aiding in building a strong educational program".⁵³

Long, the diplomat and businessman, was always working out some scheme to develop the economies of Central America—be it by tapping sulfur from Nicaragua's volcanoes or by introducing soy beans as a food staple in Guatemala. As a young man, Long joined the diplomatic service because he wanted to "do something" for the peoples in the south: "Our Government has a sacred duty towards them and should lead them towards a higher form of civilization by precept and example". In one of his more prosaic descriptions of the white man's duty, Long described how the Spaniards had broken the spirits of the Maya Indians and they now needed outside help to get back on their feet again. Referring to an old Maya legend, Long wrote that the "ship of dreams will come again to the stricken Indian nation, and salvation will be brought by the white-faced gods in the end". His use of analogies when he talked about Central America are a gender historian's dream: He once wrote friends that Nicaragua was "virgin country" that was "ripe" for development. Long had a very strong interest in the material improvement of the southern republics, which, he believed, required active American involvement because Latin peoples were too passive to do it themselves.⁵⁴ By the time he took over the Guatemalan post, Long was singularly devoted to road building. As one of his secretaries wrote to his wife:

Boaz is a character. Doesn't know my first name yet. The most un-personal (or impersonal) man I have known. No interest whatsoever in people. Things and ideas yes. Over 60 but indifferent to discomfort. Completely egotistical but not offensive. Simply negative (...) I believe he neither likes nor dislikes anyone in the world, unless one should interfere with his consuming passion, which is road-building just now. Also mildly interested in soy beans.

According to this same secretary, Long's passion for roads even got in the way of his diplomatic duties: "He has stacks of mail. Does he look at it? Not even a peep. Roads, roads, nothing but 'em (...) Are you beginning to get the picture?"⁵⁵

The one thing that united these men was their very personal dedication to the Good Neighbor policy and its main champion, Franklin Roosevelt. Corrigan, for example,

⁵² Fay Allen Des Portes (U.S. Minister to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1256, May 15, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 3, cl. 711: War. Peace. Friendship. Alliance.

⁵³ Kyle to Arnold Nicholson, Memorandum on Dean Kyle's background, educational training, travels and practical experience to equip him for the ambassadorship in Guatemala, n.d. (ca. 1943), Cornell University, Carl A. Kroch Library Rare & Manuscript Collections, Archives 1686: Edwin Jackson Kyle papers, 1934-1955;

⁵⁴ Long to Judge Vincentt, October 4, 1916, Long Papers, Box 48, Folder 136: Letters Sent; Long, undated pamphlet (ca. 1917), Long Papers, Box 53, Folder 224: Special Report: Conditions in Germany after the Stillhalte Agreement, 1931; Long to Dempsey, April 13, 1936, Long Papers, Box 48, Folder 140: Letters sent and letters received; Long to Chavez, August 22, 1936, Long Papers, Box 48, Folder 140: Letters sent and letters received.

⁵⁵ Correspondence and early diary entries of Gerald A. Drew, 1919-1970, ADST.

confided in a letter to his president that he regarded the latter as a “social and economic savior”.⁵⁶ Before the liberal Salvadoran press, Corrigan painted a picture of Roosevelt as “the highest summit of humanity of the present time, since he is nothing less than the ‘Apostle of Democracy’”.⁵⁷ Likewise, Des Portes propagated to the Guatemalan press the “true feelings” of Good Neighborliness entertained by the American government and was always sure to link those directly to President Roosevelt.⁵⁸ Except for “impersonal” Long perhaps, the politicians attempted to embody the policy of their chief with a more informal, friendly, and welcoming attitude than their predecessors.⁵⁹ Central Americans seem to have loved it. That, at least, is the impression conveyed by local newspapers, which, intriguingly, often mentioned the fact that Roosevelt’s appointees were not of Anglo-Saxon heritage: The Salvadoran periodical *Diario de Hoy* remarked on Corrigan that he “has never appeared to us of Saxon temperament. We find him a fluent talker, enthusiastic, witty, ironic”.⁶⁰

While their friendly, informal approach to diplomacy and their impulse to help the Latin neighbors were doubtlessly sincere, there was also a darker side to the attitude of the Roosevelt appointees. These diplomats hardly believed that the Central Americans were their equals. A patronizing attitude toward the southern neighbors seemed inherent in North American culture and did not leave the Good Neighbors untouched. The manifestation of these feelings did change over time, however. It was no longer acceptable during the Good Neighbor era, for example, to refer to the Latins in racist terms in diplomatic correspondence.⁶¹ Other terms were found, though, to express the American sense of superiority. Words were borrowed from anthropology, science, and even medicine that lent an air of objectivity to derogatory comments. Corrigan, the medical doctor, opined that Central Americans “are politically embryonic and still need obstetrical care lest they be born badly and grow up idiots”.⁶² When describing the difficulties of government in Honduras, Erwin liked to point out that some 75 percent of Hondurans were illiterate, while 55 percent were born out of wedlock—statistics that were doubtlessly intended as an illustration of low intellect and high irresponsibility

⁵⁶ Corrigan to Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 24, 1934, Corrigan Papers, Box 9, Folder: Roosevelt, F.D. & Eleanor.

⁵⁷ Corrigan does note that the Salvadoran journalists who interviewed him eventually published an “impression” of his words, not a direct quotation. Francis P. Corrigan (U.S. Minister to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 936, February 1, 1937, PR El Salvador, Box 7, Vol. II, cl. 123: Corrigan.

⁵⁸ For example: Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 893, June 9, 1939, PR Guatemala, Box 23, cl. 800: Misc.

⁵⁹ Correspondence and early diary entries of Gerald A. Drew, 1919-1970, ADST, gives a good impression of the American Legation in Salvador under Corrigan.

⁶⁰ Corrigan to the Secretary of State, Despatch 936, February 1, 1937, PR El Salvador, Box 7, Vol. II, cl. 123: Corrigan.

⁶¹ Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 296.

⁶² Corrigan to Willard Beaulac, April 15, 1936, Corrigan Papers, General Correspondence, Box 1, Folder: Beaulac, Willard.

among the locals.⁶³ Based on the well-established historical and anthropological views of the time, a report signed by Des Portes stated that:

The Guatemalan Indian has preserved his customs, habits, dress, and manner of thinking from the time of the Spanish conquest to the present. He is, generally speaking, a product of the serfdom imposed upon him by the Spanish colonist and subsequent masters who have found it to their interest to keep him in that state. He is the dumb, half-slave, half-drudge of the large estate holders and can best be likened to the Chinese coolie whom he resembles in many outward ways notwithstanding their completely different cultures.⁶⁴

There is no evidence suggesting that the Roosevelt appointees expanded the legation's circle of contacts or network of informants. In fact, in the context of Central American politics, Good Neighborliness led to restrictions in the ministers' circle of acquaintances. With regard to the Central American side of the story, it should be remembered that by about 1935, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras were ruled by dictatorships. While civil liberties had never been very secure in the region, the regimes of the 1930s were better equipped than most previous regimes to positively repress the free press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc. Many active opponents of the regimes were exiled or kept under surveillance. Newspapers and other periodicals that did not conform to political realities were soon closed down.⁶⁵

Since the American legations depended on personal contacts and newspaper publications for information, restrictions on civil liberties severely limited the diversity of sources on political life in the isthmian republics. Foreign Service inspection reports bear witness to this development: Already in 1935, Minister Hanna complained to the Foreign Service inspector that:

...keeping informed concerning the internal political situation is a specially difficult problem because of the dictatorial nature of the existing Government. The surface indications are misleading. The press is submissive if not completely controlled. The sources of information customarily present in other capitals are lacking here. The conditions being as just stated, close and continual contact with a large number of people is absolutely essential if the Minister is to keep even fairly well informed (...) It is not practicable for him to do this effectively with the existing staff organization.

Under these circumstances, Hanna claimed, the president of the republic "may be regarded as the principal if not the only source of authentic information". Despite these assertions, the inspector chided the legation in Guatemala for depending too heavily on

⁶³ It is not known where Erwin picked up this piece of "information", but it was much used. For example: John D. Erwin (U.S. Ambassador to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1322, August 21, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras, August to December; Lt. Col. Nathan A. Brown, jr. (U.S. Acting Military Attaché to Honduras) to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 839, April 14, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 22, Vol. 13, cl. 850.4: Labor; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1549, December 22, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 22, Vol. 13, cl. 850.4: Labor.

⁶⁴ Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2067, August 22, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 41, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

⁶⁵ On the establishment of dictatorships, see chapter 4.

the press, while the Minister himself admitted that “sources of information provided by an opposition press do not exist” and “such items of information as appear in the local press (...) generally reflect the official point of view”.⁶⁶

The same situation was described in several other inspection reports throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. “As the press in Honduras is under a strict Governmental control at present information for political reports of value must be sought industriously through personal contacts. The political situation, as at present, lends itself to much speculation and widely varying rumors most of which have little definite basis other than aspirations and fears...”, according to Keena, 1935.⁶⁷ Some six years later, Erwin reported that: “The only difficulty experienced by this office in obtaining political information is a certain mistrust on the part of Hondurans opposed to the present Government in maintaining current contact with the members of the [Legation’s] staff”. And while contacts with people who were opposed or indifferent to the regime were “discreetly maintained”, the legation still depended most heavily on “sources of political information [from] within the Government”.⁶⁸ Describing the one-sidedness of available sources, the legation in El Salvador noted in 1943 that:

President Martínez is a de facto dictator and there is only one legal political party (the “Pro Patria”) permitted. Moreover, the mail, press and radio are strictly censored. The National Legislative Assembly is merely a rubber stamp, which automatically enacts all laws presented by the Government. Consequently there are no open opposition and criticism of the Government.⁶⁹

Although this subject will be further developed elsewhere, it should be noted that Good Neighbor diplomacy itself only made it more difficult for American diplomats to obtain information from alternative sources. The problem, as the State Department described it in 1944, was that of defining “the line where friendliness toward the government of an allied sister republic ends and friendliness toward a particular political regime begins”.⁷⁰ That wisdom, however, was the product of some ten years of experience in Good Neighbor diplomacy. The distinction between a particular regime and a government or a people more generally was not so clear during the earlier years of the Good Neighbor. In the Central American context—that is, under a dictatorship—the conceptual differentiation between government and regime was particularly problematic, because regimes never changed and everyone who was opposed to the regime was necessarily an enemy of the state. In this polarized political environment, the American legations could not very well maintain public contact with the opposition and

⁶⁶ Nathaniel P. Davis (U.S. Foreign Service inspector) to the Secretary of State, January 7, 1936, Lot Files: Inspection Reports, Box 66, Vol. 1935.

⁶⁷ Davis to the Secretary of State, December 13, 1935, Lot Files: Inspection Reports, Box 160, Vol. 1935.

⁶⁸ Charles B. Hosmer (Foreign Service inspector) to Erwin, March 24, 1942, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 1, cl. 124.6: Inspection Report.

⁶⁹ H. Merle Cochran (U.S. Foreign Service inspector) to Walter Thurston (U.S. Minister to El Salvador), January 25, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 77, Vol. IV, cl. 124.6: Routine Reports.

⁷⁰ E.R. Stettinius, Jr. to the U.S. Embassies in Latin America, February 2, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala.

be on friendly terms with the government at the same time. And since the practical goal of the Good Neighbor was to obtain trade agreements and to build an alliance against extra-continental aggression, good relations with the powers that be were imperative. Hence the need for “discretion”, in Erwin’s words, whenever the legation dealt with persons that were not part of the political establishment.

An additional problem was that the local regimes did everything they could to convey the impression that American friendliness and support was aimed at them specifically. While this subject will be further discussed in chapter four, the following incident is illustrative: On March 13, 1937, U.S. minister to Guatemala Fay Des Portes sent a brief telegram to the State Department: “Shall Legation fly flag Monday fifteenth in honor [unconstitutional reelection] President Ubico in office QUESTION MARK”.⁷¹ For the legation, this was indeed a major question mark. Its staff had witnessed how seemingly minor matters of diplomatic protocol were claimed by different groups in Guatemalan society, taken out of context, and redefined as tokens of American support for- or opposition against Ubico’s continuance in office. In 1936 for example, the State Department’s bureau of protocol had, on President Roosevelt’s behalf, drafted a politely worded reply to a personal letter from Ubico to the American chief, informing the latter of his reelection. The brief reply was pushed for all it was worth in Guatemala’s government-controlled press, which presented it as proof for a personal bond of friendship between FDR and Ubico.⁷² In February 1937, however, the legation in Guatemala neglected to send Ubico a note of congratulations on his six year anniversary in office. Representatives of many American companies in Guatemala were also absent from the celebrations for various reasons, thereby feeding rumors that the United States did not sympathize with Ubico’s reign.⁷³

The peculiar Guatemalan art of claiming and representing symbols of U.S. affection, or lack thereof, was lost on Washington, however. Secretary Hull answered the legation’s request with an evasive telegram: “You should use your own judgment about flying the flag although if flags are being flown no reason is perceived why you should not act similarly PERIOD”.⁷⁴ This answer represents the Department’s determination not to stand out in the Guatemalan political landscape—the United States would not interfere in local matters, period. Shortly thereafter, the legation informed the Guatemalan minister of Foreign Affairs that the Stars and Stripes would be flown in honor of Ubico’s second term.⁷⁵

This brief exchange of telegrams between the legation and the Department also illustrates U.S.-Guatemalan diplomatic relations over the following years: The State

⁷¹ Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Telegram 6, March 13, 1937, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

⁷² See also chapter 5, pages 176-182.

⁷³ Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 190, February 17, 1937, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

⁷⁴ Cordell Hull (U.S. Secretary of State) to Des Portes, Telegram 3, March 15, 1937, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

⁷⁵ Des Portes to Carlos Salazar (Guatemalan Minister of Foreign Affairs), March 15, 1937, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

Department was preoccupied with European affairs and content to leave purely Central American matters to the stewardship of the ministers who were expected to maintain the Good Neighbor Policy there. Under these circumstances, the day-to-day diplomatic relations between the United States and the isthmian republics were virtually reduced to the personal bonds between legation staff and local government officials.

3. THE POSTWAR PROFESSIONALS, 1945-1952

Taking the Central American region as a whole, the pattern of appointments during the war and the postwar years to the American diplomatic posts there seems to favor career men. Only in Honduras and Guatemala were political appointees kept on during the war years. The post-war years were almost entirely dominated by career men, although the politicians did make a comeback toward the end of Truman's second term (a pattern which was also noticeable during the Roosevelt period) with four "deserving" Democrats appointed to Central America between 1948 and 1953. As was to be expected, only one of the latter men was carried over to the Eisenhower Foreign Service.

The career officers who served in El Salvador during the War and after were Walter Clarence Thurston (1942-1944), John Farr Simmons (1944-1947), Albert Frank Nufer (1947-1949), and George Price Shaw (1949-1952). Toward the end of Truman's second term, political appointee Angier Biddle Duke, the scion of a wealthy New York family, also served in Salvador, but was retired by the Eisenhower administration. In Guatemala, Edwin Kyle served until 1948, when he was replaced by Richard Cunningham Patterson, another appointee. When Patterson was declared *persona non grata* by the Guatemala authorities in 1950, he was eventually replaced with career diplomatist Rudolf Emil Schoenfeld (1951-1954). John Erwin ended his ten year tour in Honduras, involuntarily, in 1947 and was replaced by Paul Clement Daniels (1947). In that same year, Daniels was promoted to the Department and replaced by careerist Herbert Bursley (1947-1951). In 1951, Erwin made a comeback and was assigned to Honduras for another 3 years, until he was again forced into retirement by the Eisenhower administration.

Aside from a dry account of the many posts they served in, little can be said about these career men. This is not because they are inherently less interesting than, say, Lay, or Hanna, or Corrigan, or Long. Doubtlessly, their extended travels around the world as young diplomatists made for very interesting lives. However, their names did not pop up in the social sections of major newspapers, as was the case with Foreign Service officers of old and wealthy families. Nor did they leave memoirs or personal papers, something many political appointees did because they had had long and colorful careers before they went into diplomacy and—or so it seems in many cases—because they generally had an inflated sense of self-importance than the careerists did. Also, they left less of a personal stamp on the reports produced at their posts.

As a group and individually, the seven career officers who were appointed to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras between roughly 1943 and 1952 seem rather unremarkable. They did not own "castle-like" mansions in Newport, like more aristocratic

diplomats did, nor had they engaged in interesting careers or made high-placed friends, like the political appointees. And while most of these careerists have not made it to the history books, these well-trained, dedicated professionals represent the rank-and-file of the postwar American Foreign Service. Except for Daniels (b. 1903), all were born in the closing years of the 19th century. Most of them originated from the northeast coast, although Thurston and Shaw were from Colorado and Kansas respectively. Business and Law were popular educations among these seven, but only Simmons and Daniels attended Ivy League schools. Generally speaking, they had finished their educations around 1910 and joined the Foreign Service thereafter—putting in many years of hard work at small posts before they reached the highest ranks of the Service.

Daniels was the last to join the Service in 1927, the other six joined between 1910 and 1920, while in their teens or early twenties. Unlike men like Whitehouse, they did not have the privilege of starting out as private secretaries. Instead, they all started out as clerks or consular assistants and slowly climbed the ranks within a service that was quickly professionalizing between roughly 1915 and 1925. They saw all the levels of the diplomatic establishment, serving in both the consular and diplomatic branches, but also at the Department in Washington. Around 1945, after having served in almost every rank in the diplomatic and consular branch of the Foreign Service and having seen many different countries in Europe and Latin America, these seven men came under consideration for promotions to the ambassadorial level. All were, to a greater or lesser extent, specialized in the Latin American region and, without exception, their first assignment as chief of mission was to a Central American post (except for Schoenfeld, who had earlier served in Rumania as chief of mission). This again suggests that these embassies were considered by the Department to be training grounds for new chiefs. Actually, if one includes the political appointees, all but three chiefs who served in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras during the decade following the War were freshly appointed to the ambassadorial level.

All seven career men had served a number of years in Latin America, notably at the executive levels of their post (consul, secretary, or counselor) during the Good Neighbor years. Thurston, Simmons, and Daniels had been assistant chiefs of the Latin American Division of the Department, with the first also serving as that division's chief from 1930 to 1931. Although they remained in the Foreign Service, the War did not go by unnoticed for these men, all of them offering a humble contribution to the fight against fascism in some diplomatic or administrative capacity. Thurston served in Spain and the Soviet Union during the late 1930s and early 40s and had to evacuate his posts several times due to the advance of Axis armies.⁷⁶ Schoenfeld was the American chargé d'affaires to the exiled governments in London throughout the War. Simmons claimed that he had witnessed the rise of Nazism while he was stationed at the consulate in

⁷⁶ See chapter 7, page 227.

Cologne during the early 30s.⁷⁷ Shaw, Daniels, and Bursley were involved in the coordination of American war measures in the Western Hemisphere, serving, respectively, as the Department's assistant chief of Foreign Activities Correlation, chair of the American Coffee Board, and assistant chief of the Division of American Republic Affairs.⁷⁸

Whether the relative abundance of career appointments to Central America (as compared to the prewar period) was a matter of policy or coincidence is not clear. Several probable explanations come to mind, though these are merely educated guesses. First of all, the Truman administration may have found it prudent initially to hold back on the appointment of *politicos*, since a wholesale replacement of career men with Truman supporters would have provoked negative comments from the press and perhaps even accusations of nepotism from political opponents. Only when its mandate was confirmed in 1947 did the administration appoint more Democrats to diplomatic posts. Another reason to hold back on political appointments to Central America could have been the lack of interest in the region during the postwar years. While the isthmian countries were looked upon as a "front" for Good Neighbor diplomacy before the War, the region's solid support for the American war effort seemed to imply that it was secure and pro-American. U.S. interest focused on Europe and Asia and the Truman administration would have had a hard time convincing its political appointees that a post in Central America was in any way desirable or interesting. It is also possible, however, to think of affirmative reasons to appoint career men to Central America during and after the War. Most importantly, the work of an ambassador had become considerably more complex since the prewar years. Embassies had been greatly expanded and needed to stay in touch with the new American agencies that were introduced to the region during the War and that remained there to execute the Point IV programs later. Furthermore, many new treaties and other international commitments were arranged during and after the War. Due to the many technicalities surrounding the negotiations for such commitments, Washington may have preferred to use the professionals at its disposal, although a *politico* would, of course, be able to lean on an expanded embassy staff.

The period leading up to and including the first years of the Second World War brought some major practical changes in U.S. policy toward Latin America due to U.S. attempts to lead the Western Hemisphere through neutrality and war—objectives that came to overshadow all other concerns. For the Foreign Service, this meant a major change of pace, functions, and objectives in the daily management of legations (officially embassies from 1943 onward) in the other American republics. At the time, the State Department and its Foreign Service were actually among the smallest departments (in terms of personnel) in the executive branch of the American government. While the

⁷⁷ Memorandum enclosed in Gerhard Gade (U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2249, December 8, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador.

⁷⁸ Unless indicated otherwise, all the information on the professional lives of these men is from: *Register* (1950) 71, 377-378, 458, 463, and 504.

Second World War would accelerate the drive toward specialization within the Foreign Service, the allegedly positive effects of this development would not be felt at the posts for some time. During the War, U.S. posts were enlarged and reinforced with the arrival of cultural attachés, agricultural attachés, intelligence attachés, etc. Up to the first years of the War, however, the smaller posts in Central America still had to get by with two to four officers and a hand full of clerks. While the workload exploded from 1939 onward, additional staff was not forthcoming, because the State Department badly needed additional staff in Washington and in other countries that were more directly affected by the War. While a temporary “Auxiliary Service” was founded to help out with foreign affairs work, many experienced officers also volunteered for military services or were drafted into the army (the rules for exemption from service were very strictly applied and only the most experienced officers, or those with established families, were permanently excluded from the draft).

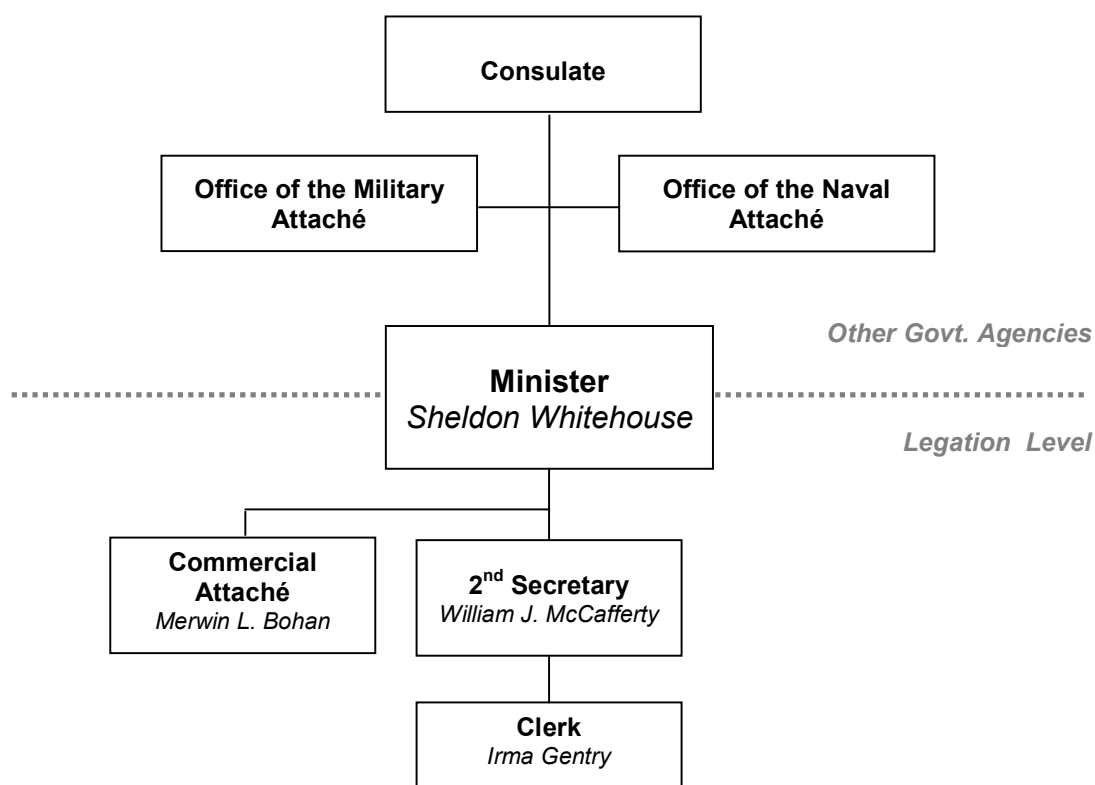


Figure 1: The U.S. Legation in Guatemala, ca. 1930
 The above diagram shows the structure of a typical U.S. Legation in Central America.
 This structure hardly changed throughout the 1930s, although the number of
 secretaries and clerks might vary at times.

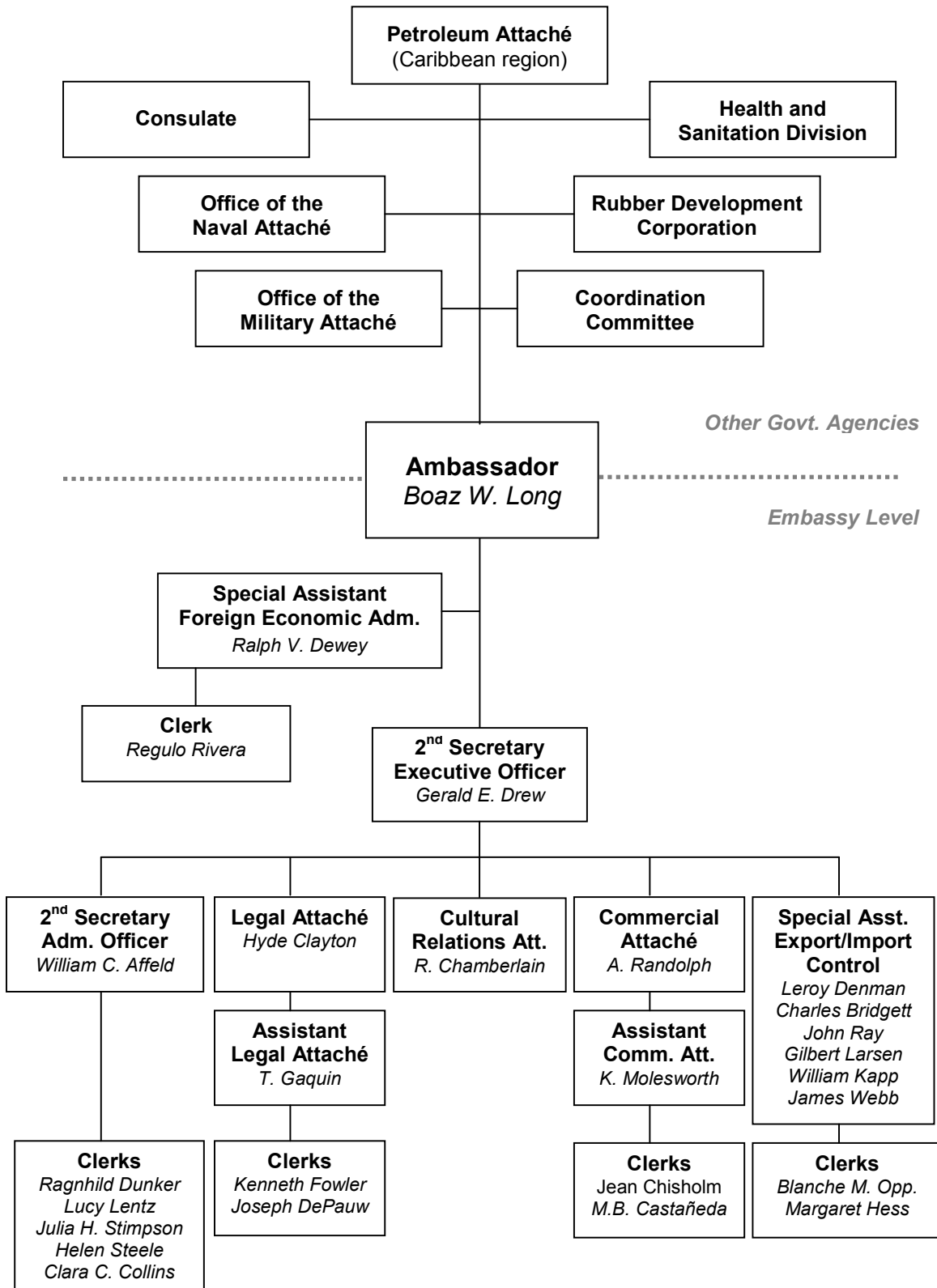


Figure 2: The U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, ca. 1944
 The above diagram indicates the expansion of the duties and the personnel
 of a U.S. Embassy during World War II

Also conspicuous during this period was a trend toward the professionalization of the Foreign Service and of the expansion and specialization of its tasks. While this development was barely noticeable before the War, it went into overdrive from 1939 onward. The acute need for military cooperation, the expansion of economic warfare capabilities, the development of war-related resources, the coordination of the Nazi hunt, the intensification of cultural relations, the strengthening of local economies, etc, etc, brought to the Central American legations a broad array of experts in these fields. Military attachés, economic experts, legal attachés, and cultural liaison officers—almost all of whom needed their own clerks, typists, and messengers—swelled the ranks of the legation staffs.* And this was only in addition to the many new, war-related agencies that were continually popping up and, formally at least, fell under the jurisdiction of the American ministers.⁷⁹

The expansion of the staff of the American legation in Honduras is a fine illustration of this development. Around the beginning of the 1930s, the legation was staffed by the minister, one Foreign Service officer, and one to three clerks. Toward the end of the War, the staff had expanded to include two additional Foreign Service officers, two additional economic experts, and between seven and ten additional clerks. The size of the staff of the American embassy now exceeded, in fact, that of the staff of the Honduran ministry of Foreign Affairs! At the same time, the staff of the embassy in Guatemala, which performed several functions for the entire Central American region, had grown from roughly five employees in 1930 to well over twenty in 1944, because it also included legal, cultural, and commercial attachés and several special assistants. These numbers do not take into account the consular officers and military attachés and instructors, or employees of the Coordination Committee, Health and Sanitation Division, and Rubber Development Corporation, all of whom worked under the general direction of the American embassy in Guatemala during the War (see figures 1 and 2).

The implication of this development was, of course, that, by the end of the War, there was not a single sector of Central American government, economy, and society that was not somehow connected with and influenced by the American embassies. Aside from the regular contacts between the embassies and important politicians and government officers, which is the traditional function of the American Foreign Service, the work of the embassies' commercial and consular sections also affected the economy through export and import controls over products needed for the war effort; "blacklisting" of enemy enterprises and businesses; the building of public works such as the Inter-American highway and the hospitals, sewers, and water purification plants of the Health

* This does not include the offices of the Consulates. Some of these specialists did not belong to the Foreign Service but to other Departments. The Department of Commerce had its commercial attachés. The Department of Justice its legal attachés (in Latin America, the legal attaché was often a F.B.I. agent who did intelligence work). The Departments of Army, Navy, and Air (later the Department of War and still later Defense) had their military and navy attachés. In Central America, one military attaché was usually accredited to all the Central American republics together and would be stationed permanently in Guatemala. During the War, however, every legation or embassy had its own military and/or navy attaché.

⁷⁹ See figures on pages 57-58.

and Sanitation Division; the diversification of agriculture through the Rubber Development Corporation and the Fruit companies; and the general management of the economy through the local Coordination Committees, which included local businessmen, bankers, and representatives of the Chambers of Commerce. The Central American security apparatuses (military, constabulary, police, and secret service) received training from- and exchanged information with the military attachés and the legal attachés—mostly FBI agents. Cultural attachés managed exchange programs between Central American and American universities and research institutions, supported the work of local libraries and other cultural institutions, and provided “information” to local newspapers. Politicians, businessmen, police officers, soldiers, journalists and editors, university students and professors, agriculturalists, medical doctors, etc. etc. They all felt the American presence in some way or another.⁸⁰

The expansion of the Foreign Service and its posts abroad was a product of the pressure and stress of war. While it may not have lived up to it in every sense, the makeup of the prewar Foreign Service was guided by the ideal that a democratic, anti-colonial, and peaceful country like the United States did not need a large diplomatic corps. The latter was associated with secret deals, espionage, intrigue, and other such assorted skullduggery, which had plunged Europe into the First World War. The European powers used their expansive diplomatic establishments, it was believed, to facilitate international arms trafficking, colonial administration, and dissemination of propaganda. The United States, in contrast, could get by with a small corps of professionals and the occasional citizen diplomat (political appointee) to maintain peaceful relations and expand commercial connections with other nations.

It is obvious, then, that it is not only the individual officers or the “type” of officers assigned to Central America that changed between 1930 and 1950, but that the Foreign Service itself went through some considerable changes during the period. While the expansion of the American Foreign Service is generally associated with the postwar period (which is true for Europe), American ambassadors in Central America had been struggling with a deluge of new tasks and specialists for some years. The experience was not always a happy one and did not always lead to a more efficient Service (although the measure of efficiency that one would ascribe to the embassies is, of course, dependent on the objectives that one would like them to achieve. In terms of paper output, for example, the efficiency of the Service was certainly enhanced after 1939). Only toward the end of the period under discussion here did embassy employees

⁸⁰ Cabot to the Secretary of State, Organizational Report Guatemala, July 9, 1940, State Department Central File, Box 669; Drew to the Department of State, Organizational Report Guatemala, State Department Central File, Box 669; Cousins to the Secretary of State, Organizational Report Honduras, January 1, 1940, State Department Central File, Box 669; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Organizational Report Honduras, June 26, 1944, State Department Central File, Box 669; Gade to the Secretary of State, Organizational Report El Salvador, November 8, 1940, State Department Central File, Box 670; Gade to the Secretary of State, Organizational Report El Salvador, June 22, 1944, State Department Central File, Box 670. These numbers also exclude employees without diplomatic functions such as guards, messengers, gardeners, cleaners, etc.

of all Departments come together under the coordination of the ambassador to produce joint reports (the so-called “Joint Weeka”). Before that time, conflict and confusion characterized the work of the enlarged embassies at least as much as coordinated efforts.⁸¹

In conclusion, it should be noted that a healthy variety of Foreign Service officers served in Central America throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The region was not the exclusive reserve of clueless political appointees—though there were some of those—nor of particularly outstanding professionals—though there were some of those too. It is remarkable that many chiefs of mission in Central America were freshly appointed to that rank and that the administrations in Washington tended dump a relatively large number of appointees there after reelection. However, this is not *necessarily* a recipe for bad diplomacy. Inexperienced officers could offer fresh insights while the old hands, despite their experience, were sometimes woefully unable to deal with the peculiar circumstances they encountered at their isthmian posts. It is undeniable, for example, that careerist Matthew Hanna’s experience in the Dominican Republic led him to pursue a disastrous policy in El Salvador. It is also remarkable how insightful some of politico Frank Corrigan’s reports were when compared to the bland writings of professionals in neighboring republics.⁸²

Generalizations such as those presented in the current chapter can only go so far, of course. The following chapters will demonstrate that individual officers—because of their individual prejudices and experiences—had a profound impact both on the course of American policy and on the histories of the Central American republics. What if Sheldon Whitehouse had been assigned to El Salvador instead of Guatemala in 1929? Would General Martínez’ career have been cut short in 1932? And what if a professional diplomat had been assigned to Guatemala in 1945? Would the Guatemalan revolution have been better understood in Washington?

It should also be stressed that the American posts in Central (and South) America seemed to be regarded as testing grounds not only for new chiefs of mission, but also for new policy and new forms of Foreign Service organization. Concerning policy, the nonintervention principle and the policy regarding disreputable governments should be mentioned.⁸³ Regarding organization, it can be said that while the stereotype of the lonely officer plodding along at his mosquito infested post holds true for the 1920s, the American posts had become major organizations by the early 1950s (especially when

⁸¹ See chapters 6 and 7.

⁸² Using a statistical analysis, one Phillip L. Kelly has attempted to prove that Latin America received ambassadors of poor caliber in the postwar decades. It is, of course, undeniable that the most talented officers went to London, Paris, or Berlin (or Brazil and Venezuela, as Kelly’s analysis also shows) but it remains impossible (for a historian) to scientifically measure the effectiveness of the training of these officers, let alone measure the “success” of their tenures in Latin America. Besides, what would the measure of that success be? Phillip L. Kelly, “The characteristics of United States ambassadors to Latin America”, *Inter-American Economic Affairs* 30 (Autumn 1976) 49-80.

⁸³ See chapters 2 and 7.

compared to the diminutive size of some of the Central American government agencies). These developments, combined with the eccentricities of individual diplomats and the amazing twist and turns in Central American history, account for the high degree of complexity and richness of this topic that will (hopefully) be evident in the historical narrative that follows.