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

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Chapter 2

PROPPING UP DICTATORS? Caudillos come to power in Central America, 1930-1931

HONDURAS TORN BY REVOLT;
REBELS MARCH ON CAPITAL;
FEAR AMERICANS IN PERIL

This headline, or a similar one, undoubtedly is familiar to most newspaper readers in the United States. And it has been for decades. You may substitute the name of some other Central American republic for that of Honduras, and the headline is just as familiar. Sometimes “bandits” replaces “rebels” – usually the difference is slight.

~ Major General Smedley D. Butler, 1931

A revolt in Honduras in 1931 provoked General Smedley Darlington Butler to write a short article on his own experiences as a Marine involved in the U.S. intervention in another Honduran revolt in 1903.¹ Called “Opera Bouffe Revolts” the article was intended to amuse rather than to inform fellow Americans. If Butler is to be believed, revolutions in Honduras were a fairly easy-going affair, “friendly” even, and consisted mainly of local soldiers changing the color of their hat ribbons—a blue ribbon signifying support for the government and a red ribbon signifying support for the rebels. In fact, the General wrote, these ribbons were often two-sided, blue on one side and red on the other, to allow a quick and bloodless change of sides if the situation so demanded. In case of the 1903 revolution, Butler and his Marines only went ashore once: To pick up the U.S. consul in Trujillo—who was found cowering between the beams of the floor of his house, naked but for the American flag in which he had wrapped himself²—and to escort him to their ship “in a manner due his rank and station”. Shortly after this uneventful rescue operation, “this business of turning hat-bands inside out had become epidemic, with the result that the revolt was over”.

¹ Smedley D. Butler, “Opera-Bouffe Revolts: What usually happens when the Marines have landed”, *PR Honduras*, Volume 181, cl. 891: Public Press. The article originally appeared in the magazine *Liberty* on October 10, 1931.

² Butler makes sure to point out that the American consul in this case was actually a native of Honduras.

Butler's little chit on Honduran revolutions is part of a long American tradition of making fun of the southern neighbors and their unabashed tendency toward rebellion.³ Having read the occasional O. Henry story or Time Magazine article on the "Banana Republics", nothing in Butler's writing must have struck the American reader as particularly incorrect. His explanation for the causes of Central American revolutions could have appeared to his readers as very nearly accurate:

An ambitious local leader simply decided that the then president had had enough of public office and what goes with it and it was high time he be sent scampering away – with the ambitious local leader as the new president. That's the reason for virtually all revolts in the Caribbean area. The names mean nothing. There have been too many presidents, too many *insurrectos*, and too many rebellions in that land for anyone to try to remember them.

Indeed, American leaders had been calling upon the sister republics to stop their "chronic wrongdoing" and learn to "elect good men" at least since the start of the 20th century. More often than not, Marines were dispatched to add substance to these wise words and to enforce a measure of democratic development in the region.⁴ To the contemporary who believed in the essential correctness of the didactic policies of the U.S. navy in the region, it must have been exasperating, as Butler wrote, to open the Sunday newspaper and read about another of the countless revolutions in the "American Balkans". But things were about to change.

Over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the United States abandoned its practice of intervening militarily in Central America and the Caribbean. Almost simultaneously, brutal dictators came to power in that region and put an end to the seemingly insistent revolutions. The coincidence of these events inspired a common historical interpretation: That Washington used the new generation of Central American dictators as a cheap replacement for its Marines. In this chapter, it will be argued that this interpretation is a gross oversimplification of what actually happened. It will seek to demonstrate the confusion that accompanied America's move away from armed intervention; will analyze how seemingly clear-cut policy objectives in Washington were often diffused by local diplomats; and will argue that even though American involvement in the events of the 1930s was considerable, the *outcomes* of such involvement cannot be directly linked to U.S. *intentions* for Central America.

The focus of this and following chapters will be on the American diplomatic envoys in Central America who, in the absence of clear policy guidelines from Washington, had to fall back on their beliefs about the nature of the Latin Other and their personal relation to them. As it turned out, unlike historians who have the benefit of hindsight, these men had no idea that their actions would contribute to the establishment of at least 15 years of uninterrupted dictatorial rule in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Instead, the men who came to power in this period appeared to the Americans to be honest and

³ For a short description of American representations of Honduras which are either satirical or idealized, see: Alison Acker, *Honduras: The making of a banana republic* (Boston 1988) 16-25.

⁴ On U.S intervention and policy of coercive democratization during the early 20th century: Paul W. Drake, "From Good Men to Good Neighbors: 1912-1932", in: Abraham F. Lowenthal ed., *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America* (Baltimore and London 1991) 3-40.

progressive presidents who had come to power through free and fair elections: They represented, in short, a big step forward in Central American development.

1. THE SOMOZA SOLUTION?

Towards the end of the 1920s, there were several incentives for U.S. policymakers to discontinue the sending of Marines to Central America, as had happened so often in the past. Firstly, these interventions did not lead to any recognizable improvement in the stability of local governments. Secondly, such intervention, which sometimes required extensive periods of occupation and police duty, was costly and became especially unpopular with the budget-minded Congress of the Depression era. Thirdly, American public opinion turned against the interventions as part of the larger movement against war and imperialism during the isolationist years.⁵ Finally, the arrogance with which the United States policed the sovereign sister republics of Central America and the Caribbean met with increasing diplomatic resistance from other Latin American states. Latin Americans understood U.S. actions in that region to be a litmus test for its attitude toward the rest of the hemisphere. Thus, interventions in that region fed Southern suspicions about U.S. imperial designs, making it increasingly difficult for U.S. diplomats and businessmen to win the trust and cooperation of the Latins. High officials in the State Department began to wonder whether it was worthwhile to maintain a costly and ineffective interventionist policy in Central America that had the potential to endanger U.S. relations with the entire hemisphere. Accordingly, the Hoover and FDR administrations developed a new Latin American policy with non-interventionism as its backbone: The now famous Good Neighbor Policy.⁶

During the same period, factional strife began to make way for strong, centralized states in Central America. For years, the isthmian republics had been largely dependent on the export of such items as bananas and coffee. Naturally, when international markets crashed after 1929, the export such luxury items was the first to suffer from the letdown of consumption in the industrialized nations. The slackening of exports was enough to push many rural communities into dismal poverty. While consequences differed in the various Central American countries, some social frictions developed everywhere. Though never serious enough to be a threat to the social order (except, perhaps, in El Salvador) the stirrings of the *campesinos* did scare the ruling economic elites enough to drive them into the arms of strongmen with military backgrounds. Thus, Jorge Ubico (1930-1944) was the first to establish a strong military regime in Guatemala and was followed in quick succession by Tiburcio Carías (1931-1948) in Honduras,

⁵ Incidentally, one of the more famous anti-war and anti-imperialist books to come out of this movement was entitled "War is a racket" and was written by none other than General, now retired, Smedley Butler

⁶ Bryce Wood, *The making of the Good Neighbor policy* (New York 1961) 3-155; Thomas M. Leonard, *Central America and the United States: The search for stability* (Athens and London 1991) 90-91; Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 71-108; Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States. A history of U.S. policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge and London 1998) 290-315; Loveman, *No Higher Law*, 238-252.

Maximiliano Hernandez Martínez (1931-1944) in El Salvador, and Anastasio Somoza (1936-1956) in Nicaragua. In El Salvador, tensions between the landless and the landowners led to violent state repression. Yet violence was not the norm. The new governments in all countries combined authoritarian tactics with some form of nationalism, populism, social justice, and economic programs aimed at the masses. These tactics were evidently successful, since—like in the rest of Latin America and in Europe—populist authoritarians ruled until at least the end of the Second World War.⁷

The fact that dictatorships were established in Central America after American Marines left the region raises an important question for historians: Is there a connection between these developments? More specifically: Did “these corrupt, repressive regimes (...) [come] into existence because of inadvertence or conscious design on the part of the United States?”⁸ Some historians have opted for the first interpretation: That there is a connection between the two developments but that it was inadvertent. During the post-war decades, when Classic Realism held sway among American historians, the received wisdom was that starry-eyed American diplomats, imbued with Wilsonian idealism, had intended the U.S. Marines to export democracy to the Caribbean during the 1920s. When these democratic experiments failed and the Marines withdrew, local strongmen used the resulting power vacuum to install their own governments. In describing the rise to power of General Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, for example, historians Atkins and Wilson argue that this could not be otherwise.⁹

A more popular interpretation, however, is that U.S. policy-makers in the early 1930s were not ready to let the chips fall where they may after the departure of the Marines. To a more or less active degree, depending on the book one reads about this matter, U.S. policy makers identified and then supported local dictators who had the will

⁷ Dodd and Grieb tend to stress the modernizing aspects of the new regimes: Dodd, *Carías*; Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*. In his preface, Grieb even notes that one purpose of his book is to nuance the overwhelmingly negative literature on Ubico. A very expansive German book on the Ubico regime discusses the accomplishments of the caudillo in minute detail: Stefan Karlen, “Paz, progreso, justicia y honradez”: *Das Ubico-Regime in Guatemala, 1931-1944* (Stuttgart 1991). A Guatemalan chronicle of presidents contains photographs of Ubico’s public works in the capital: Héctor Gaitián A., *Los Presidentes de Guatemala. Historia y Anécdotas* (Guatemala C.A. 2009) 91-99. Many authors tend to weigh the negative aspects of increased repression against the positive aspects of economic development: Gilderhus, *The second century*, 73-78; Parkman, *Nonviolent insurrection*, 20; Morris, *Caudillos Politics*, 8-12; Weaver, *Inside the Volcano*, chapter 4; Lewis, *Authoritarian Regimes*, 71. Some historians are largely negative in their judgment about the caudillos: Edelberto Torres Rivas, “Central America since 1930: An overview”, in: Leslie Bethell ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Volume VII: Latin America since 1930, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean* (Cambridge at al. 1990); Dunkerly, *Long War*, 31-34; Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 90-97; “De la Esperanza Democrática de Posguerra a la Crisis (1920-1929)”, in: Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega, *Historia General de Centroamérica. Tomo IV: Las Repúblicas Agroexportadoras* (Madrid 1993) 225-249 ; Victor Bulmer-Thomas, “La Crisis de la economía de agroexportación (1930-1945), in: *Idem*, 325-363 ; Argueta, *Carías*, passim, but especially 371-378.

⁸ Mark T. Gilderhus, *The second century. U.S.-Latin American relations since 1889* (Wilmington, DE 2000) 79.

⁹ Atkins and Wilson, *The United States and Trujillo*, 151-164.

and the means to do the Marine's job: Keep Central America stable and firmly within the U.S. sphere of influence. The English historian Jenny Pierce has fittingly described this supposed event as the "Somoza solution", named after the most notorious dictator who came to power in this period.¹⁰ While some realists have subscribed to this interpretation¹¹, it is most often adopted by those who wish to expose the dark nature of U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean—that is, by Revisionist historians.

There are many variants of the "Somoza solution" hypothesis—and by no means have all of these dealt with Anastasio Somoza—some decidedly more sophisticated than others. The general argument is that when the United States was forced to withdraw its Marines from the Caribbean in the early 1930s, Washington officials devised an inexpensive plan to keep order in America's backyard without involving U.S. troops. Before they withdrew, the Marines trained and armed national constabularies that would keep the peace in the Caribbean republics. Washington readily tolerated that the chiefs of these national armies took command over their governments after the Marines had left and throughout the 30s and 40s it would depend on these dictatorial proxies to do the job the United States Marine Corps used to do.¹²

Similarly—but from a constructivist angle—David Schmitz argues that U.S. policymakers from the 1920s onward believed that "Non-Western European people were (...) incapable of handling the difficult demands of democratic rule". Thus, it was easy and quite natural for Washington to accept and support the rise of dictatorial rule in Central America. "American officials resolved the contradiction between nonintervention and allowing self-determination and the desire for stability by supporting Somoza".¹³ Perhaps most recently, Brian Loveman argued in his concise monograph on U.S.-Latin American relations that, during the 1930s, "some U.S. objectives could be achieved (...) by installing "elected" dictatorship, buttressed by the constabularies created during the American occupation regimes. Such governments could be substituted for direct U.S. administration. So eventually Rafael Trujillo came to power in the Dominican Republic, as did the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, among other American-supported tyrants".¹⁴

¹⁰ Jenny Pearce, *Under the eagle: U.S. intervention in Central America and the Caribbean* (1982) 20-25. It is by no means a generally accepted term, but will be used here as a convenient shorthand.

¹¹ Gaddis, *We now know*, 35.

¹² Brian Loveman and Thomas Davies, *The politics of antipolitics: The military in Latin America* (Lincoln 1978) 7-8; Karl Bernmann, *Under the Big Stick. Nicaragua and the United States since 1848* (Boston 1986); Michael L. Krenn, *U.S. policy toward economic nationalism in Latin America, 1917-1929* (Wilmington 1990) 64-65 and 148-149; Blachman and Sharpe, "The transitions", in: Lious W. Goodman et al. eds., *Political parties and democracy in Central America* (Boulder, Colo, 1992); Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the eagle. Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American relations* (New York and Oxford 1996) especially chapters 2 and 3; Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 271; Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States campaign against Germans of Latin America in World War II* (Cambridge 2003) 75-78.

¹³ David F. Schmitz, "Thank God they're on our side". *The United States and right-wing dictatorships, 1921-1965* (Chapel Hill and London 1998).

¹⁴ Brian Loveman, *No higher law. American foreign policy and the western Hemisphere since 1776* (Chapel Hill, NC 2010) 242.

Some proponents of the Somoza solution theory have taken their claims to the extreme of arguing that Washington actively and consciously identified the men who should lead Central America after the departure of the Marines and then helped them to acquire and hold dictatorial powers for decades to come.¹⁵ Such an argument both underestimates Central Americans' capacity for self-determination and overestimates Washington's capacity to dictate events in other countries. Frederick Weaver convincingly argues, for example, that "it is historically inaccurate, analytically misleading and patronizing to attribute too much influence to external forces" and concludes that "the very real importance of foreign influences has to be understood in the context of Central American nations' internal dynamics". Moreover, the Central American rise of dictatorship was part of a world-wide, post-war and post-depression development that brought to power militaristic and authoritarian governments across the globe, including countries where the United States had no influence over internal events at all.¹⁶ Many specialists in Central American history and politics (as opposed to diplomatic history) have described the rise of Central American dictatorship as a factor of largely local developments in the political, social, and economic life of the region.¹⁷ Even if a measure of U.S. influence in all these developments cannot be denied, the rise of the caudillos was a much more complicated process than a case of basically "propping up" dictators.

Hence, the most sophisticated elaborations of the Somoza solution hypothesis suggest that there was a convergence of interests between U.S. policy makers and Central American dictators around 1930. Walter LaFeber, for example, argues that the United States maintained a system of economic dependency backed up by politico/military might in Central America since the beginning of the 20th century. Rather than consciously install dictatorships in the early 1930s, Washington easily accepted the rise of the caudillos and started to support them, because they fitted the pre-existing system so easily and would eventually become integral parts of it. "Deals were easily struck" between Washington and the dictators because the former needed proxies to maintain the status quo while the latter needed U.S. recognition and access to the New York money market. Thus, the "United States (...) accepted, and soon welcomed, dictatorships in Central America because it turned out that such rulers could most

¹⁵ Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 271-272.

¹⁶ Frederick S. Weaver, *Inside the volcano: The history and political economy of Central America* (Boulder, Colo., 1994) 1. Chapter 4 explains how the rise of dictatorship was a due to a combination of internal factors and developments in the world economy.

¹⁷ Patricia Parkman, *Nonviolent insurrection in El Salvador: The fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez* (Tucson 1988) 27; Hugh M. Hamill, *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America* (Norman and London 1992) passim; D.J. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford 1994) 316; Jeffrey Paige, *Coffee and power: Revolution and the rise of democracy in Central America* (Cambridge 1997) 27-28; Wade Booth and Thomas Walker eds., *Understanding Central America* (4th edition: 2006) chapters 6-8.

Very few historians of U.S. foreign policy claim that Washington never got along with the dictators: John E. Findling, *Close neighbors distant friends: United States-Central American relations* (New York et al. 1987) chapter 5; Leonard, *Central America*, 99-101 and chapter 6.

cheaply uphold order. Dictators were not a paradox but a necessity for the system, including the Good Neighbor policy".¹⁸

Despite the elegance with which this interpretation synthesizes a wide array of sources on American foreign policy over a period of many decades, there are several problems. The Somoza solution hypothesis presupposes a determination and single-mindedness in U.S. policy that is difficult—if not impossible—to find at the micro-level. The U.S. legations' handling of the elections that brought two caudillos to power do not in any way conform to the "Somoza solution" hypothesis. It is important to bear in mind that—in contrast to later historians—none of the American ministers in Central America had any way of knowing that the men who were elected to office in the early 1930s would build up dictatorships that were unprecedented, in terms of the reach of their power and the length of their rule, in Central American history. Neither did any of the legations show an interest in establishing local dictatorships. Indeed, around 1930 all the legations in Central America were determined to have free and fair elections. Rather than propping up dictatorships, the organization of local elections under the tutelage of the American legations was considered the most effective way to assure stability in the region.

2. THE ELECTIONS OF THE EARLY 1930S

Between 1930 and 1932, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras were all set to have presidential elections. The elections in Guatemala and Honduras produced two presidents—General Jorge Ubico and General Tubircio Carías—who have been identified by historians as the sort of authoritarian leaders who were part of the "Somoza solution" for Central America. Salvadorans elected one Arturo Araujo to power. This leader has been largely ignored by historians because he was removed from power by a military coup after a couple of months in office. The circumstances surrounding Araujo's election, however, are perfectly in line with events in Guatemala and Honduras.

2.1 Ubico wins in Guatemala

When minister Sheldon Whitehouse arrived in Guatemala, the country was ruled by General Lázaro Chacón of the Liberal Party. Chacón had been president since 1926, when he was elected by a margin of 250,000 votes over his opponent from the Progressive Party: Jorge Ubico. As the Depression set in, however, things went downhill for Chacón. His administration was unable to deal with the economic difficulties and it suspended constitutional guarantees several times to deal with disturbances and plots. Whitehouse himself was convinced that Chacón would not last if his administration was unable to deal with the economic difficulties of the country. In his reports to Washington, Whitehouse expressed his "devout" hope that American bankers could float a loan to

¹⁸ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable revolutions: The United States in Central America* (2nd revised and expanded edition: New York et al. 1993) 19-83, particularly 64-69 and 81.

help the Guatemalan government to stabilize the internal situation.¹⁹ The minister also had high hopes for United Fruit Company (UFCO) plans to build a modern port on Guatemala's Pacific coast.²⁰ He was quickly disappointed.

On July 9, Whitehouse ruefully admitted that "Chacón has none of the qualities of a president". In fact, the president lacked "firmness" and "his intelligence is so limited that he is unable to understand anything of the problems of government". Whitehouse reported to Washington that Chacón's cabinet ministers were plotting against their chief and against each other while the opposition in the National Assembly was exploiting the confused situation to defeat any proposal that had the potential to strengthen the government. Among such proposals were a foreign loan and the UFCO contract to build a Pacific port, exactly those projects that Whitehouse believed to be essential. The minister denounced the "ludicrous" criticism leveled at the proposals in the assembly and blamed "political passions" from obscuring the merits of both plans. Unless the president would show "unexpected firmness" in the near future, Whitehouse was pessimistic that he would be able to "finish his (...) term in peace".²¹

Despite Whitehouse's pessimism about the future of the Chacón regime, its end came unexpectedly. In fact, Guatemala's government fell apart in December 1930—while minister Whitehouse was vacationing in Florida. Admittedly, the event that pushed Guatemala over the edge could not have been foreseen. President Chacón reportedly suffered from a stroke on December 13 and presidential power was temporarily invested in a presidential designate, as prescribed by the Guatemalan constitution.

The political situation took another turn three days later. In the afternoon of December 16, the chargé d'affaires of the American legation, William McCafferty, was startled by gunfire in the streets. He quickly sent a telegram to Washington: "A revolution apparently started at 4 p.m. today (...) I believe it is a revolt of the Army against the Government". As it turned out, several army leaders had been planning a revolt against Chacón—who they believed was to blame for their declining influence in politics—for some time and they now used the president's incapacitation as a pretext to declare that the caretaker government was unconstitutional. After some confused days of fighting and negotiating, one General Manuel Orellana, the leader of the revolt, had himself elected provisional president by the National Assembly.²²

"We are not amused", yelled a *Time Magazine* header when it reported on the Orellana coup.²³ Indeed, the legation and the State Department agreed at an early date

¹⁹ Sheldon Whitehouse (U.S. Minister to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, June 18, 1930 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs, 1012).

²⁰ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, July 9, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1013).

²¹ *Idem*.

²² William McCafferty (Chargé d'Affairs ad interim, Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, December 13, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1022); McCafferty to the Secretary of State, December 13, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1023); McCafferty to the Secretary of State, December 15, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1024); McCafferty to the Secretary of State, December 16, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1025).

²³ "Guatemala: We are not amused", *TM* (January 12, 1931).

that Orellana's reign was unacceptable in the light of the 1923 Treaty.²⁴ In Guatemala, the job at hand was to put the government back on a constitutional basis while avoiding the appearance of direct intervention. This job fell to Sheldon Whitehouse who hastily returned from his vacation.

The first thing Whitehouse did when he came back was to devise a plan to put the Guatemalan government back on a constitutional basis. The eventual arrangement was to have Chacón resign his presidency. Orellana would then have to resign his "provisional" presidency as well, as he was technically only Chacón's replacement. Upon Orellana's elimination, the National Assembly would elect new designates to the presidency (since the former designates were either dead or had resigned). The First Designate to the Presidency would automatically become provisional president and call for new presidential elections. As Whitehouse admitted, there were some constitutional roadblocks in his complicated scheme, but "no one would make any difficulty about it".²⁵

Naturally, Orellana and his companions did create difficulties and the second task was to get the General to work along. On December 24, Whitehouse decided to have a chat with him. Happily, the minister's experience in France and Spain made him "rather good" at "personal encounters with Latins".²⁶ Whitehouse quite bluntly told Orellana that Washington's decision not to recognize him was "final" and that further discussions were "futile". He then outlined the plan he had construed to put Guatemalan government on a "sound" constitutional basis. Some days later, Orellana came around to the fact that the Americans would not accept him and decided to play along. On December 29 Chacón resigned the presidency under the watchful eye of Whitehouse, who was present at the official ceremony, while negotiations on the election of a provisional president were under way.²⁷

Throughout the whole encounter with Orellana, the American minister attempted to maximize the power of his office by requesting special assistance from Washington. Quite unexpectedly, as it would appear, he was told by his superiors that the non-intervention policy posed new limits on his actions. Citing the possibility that Orellana may cause trouble for a future provisional president, Whitehouse requested that an American war vessel be sent to the Guatemalan coast. He even suggested that the captain of the ship come ashore with a few officers and pay his respects to the eventual provisional president to strengthen the latter's position.²⁸ One day later, the minister was kindly informed by his superiors that such action would not be contemplated unless it

²⁴ "The Chargé in Guatemala (McCafferty) to the Secretary of State, Guatemala, December 17, 1930", FRUS 1930, vol. II, 178-180; "The Secretary of State to the Chargé in Guatemala (McCafferty), Washington, December 20, 1930", FRUS 1930, vol. II, 182-183.

²⁵ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 23, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1028).

²⁶ "Guatemala: We are not amused", *TM* (January 12, 1931).

²⁷ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 27, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1033); Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 28, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1035); Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 29, 1930 (M1280, Roll1, Political Affairs 1036).

²⁸ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 29, 1930 (M1280, Roll1, Political Affairs 1036).

was to protect American lives and property. In fact, the initial draft of the answer to Whitehouse was a very terse cable stating "I [Stimson] am not convinced that a warship is necessary under present conditions. Please continue to report".²⁹ Somewhat defensively, Whitehouse answered that he did not "mean to imply that it would be necessary to send any forces to the Capital, but merely that the presence of a warship in port would have a quieting effect".³⁰

Nearly everyone at this time was somewhat confused over what non-intervention should mean. Orellana was no exception. Even though he decided to play along with the schemes of the American minister, he was definitely not convinced that all the talk about legality and elections was sincere. When Whitehouse had the General over at the legation to discuss the future of Guatemala, the latter was surprised to hear that none of the revolutionaries should join the future provisional government and that the new provisional president should not meddle in the planned elections. Orellana chose to ignore the first statement, but could not hide his surprise over the second one. Did the minister really want *free* elections, he asked. Whitehouse wrote the Department that he "naturally replied in the affirmative". For the General, who had been pushed around by the Americans for several days, it was probably hard to believe that they would now hand over all power to the people.³¹

But Whitehouse was sincere in his insistence that all constitutional and democratic procedures should be followed during the elections. It is true that the American minister hardly respected Guatemalan politics. He believed that the Guatemalan people were basically passive while their "representatives" in the National Assembly were all too easily swayed by political passions. He also scoffed at the prevailing influence of corrupt opportunists, military men, and "political crooks" in Guatemala.³² He nonetheless thought that the American policy of discouraging revolutions and promoting constitutional procedures had a "moral benefit to Central America". Such benevolent effects would be lost, however, "if we content ourselves with a sham".³³

As one Guatemala expert has argued, the field of potential candidates for the presidency that Whitehouse's scheme allowed for was extremely limited. In the eyes of many Guatemalans, former collaborators of Chacón were discredited by the inefficiency and corruption of that regime. Members of the revolutionary forces under Orellana were

²⁹ Stimson to Whitehouse, December 30, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1036).

³⁰ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, Despatch 256, January 8, 1931 (M1280, Roll 3: Revolution 73).

³¹ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 28, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1035).

³² Interestingly, the quoted reference to "political crooks" has been deleted in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, the primary source publications of the Office of the Historian at the State Department. Many other derogatory references to Guatemalan politicians have also been edited out of FRUS.

³³ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, December 28, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1035).

told by Whitehouse that they were barred from the elections. The only realistic candidate that stood a chance to be elected was General Jorge Ubico.³⁴

Whitehouse and his colleagues at the legation certainly did not regret the strong position of the General. In fact, the legation had considered Ubico a likely and desirable future president even before minister Whitehouse arrived in Guatemala.³⁵ Whitehouse himself was no less impressed by the merits of the General. Some of the characteristics that stand out in the way the legation described Ubico were his honesty, his efficiency, his pro-American standpoints, and his strength of character. No less important was the legation's belief that Ubico had a very large popular following. There is no denying that the American legation had substantial reasons to trust and like Ubico. His honesty and efficiency were evident from his governorship over the Guatemalan department of Retalhuleu. The General's popularity was evident from several public demonstrations in his favor during the turbulent month of December 1930. Lastly, Ubico himself sought to actively ingratiate himself with the Americans by visiting the legation to give witness to his distaste for rebellions and his active support for the U.S. position.³⁶

When Whitehouse argued on December 28 that the U.S. could not afford to content itself with "a sham" in the upcoming Guatemalan elections, he was not yet certain that Ubico would actually be elected. There is no evidence to suggest that the American legation gave any inappropriate support to Ubico's campaign. Neither would that have been necessary, as it was soon clear that he was the only candidate. The political vacuum that allowed Ubico's ascendancy to the presidential palace was clearly caused by Whitehouse's scheming, but there is no reason to assume that the minister realized the implications of his actions as far as Ubico's rise to power was concerned. So while it is clear that Whitehouse was not "propping up" a dictatorship, it is interesting to see how he reconciled the fact that Ubico was the sole candidate to the presidency, with his earlier insistence on free elections.

Throughout the months of January and February, Whitehouse argued to his superiors in Washington that Ubico would have been the winner in a hypothetical contested campaign for the presidency: "In spite of the fact that he is the only candidate, there is very little doubt but that General Ubico is the choice of the large majority of the people of Guatemala".³⁷ Such widespread enthusiasm for Ubico, according to Whitehouse, was a reaction to "utter incapacity and widespread dishonesty of the Chacón administration". In contrast to earlier presidents, Ubico was regarded as a man of "absolute honesty, of intelligence and ability" and as the only man capable of "bringing

³⁴ Grieb, "American involvement in the rise of Jorge Ubico", *Caribbean Studies* 10:1 (April, 1970) 5-21.

³⁵ See for example: Stanley Hawks (Chargé d'Affairs ad interim, Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, April 2, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1010).

³⁶ In addition to despatches mentioned below, consult: Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, Despatch 101, July 9, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1013); McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 218, November 13, 1930 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1020); Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, Despatch 246G, December 31, 1930 (M1280, Roll 2: General Conditions 37).

³⁷ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, January 29, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1054).

order out of chaos”.³⁸ It is striking that the minister described Ubico as the exact opposite of Chacón, who was portrayed by the legation as inefficient, incapable, corrupt, and ignorant. Conversely, Ubico was described as capable, strong, and intelligent. One of his more outstanding qualities, one that Whitehouse stressed on almost every occasion, was his honesty. The minister approvingly reported that one of Ubico’s campaign promises was to disclose all his possessions at the beginning of his term (something that the General actually did), so that a comparison could be made when he left office.³⁹ If there was anyone who was not looking forward to Ubico’s presidency with “any too great joy”, Whitehouse opined, that would be because he was “crooked”.⁴⁰ Another major point to Ubico’s credit was his pro-Americanism (which was probably also regarded as evidence for his intelligence). Ubico told Whitehouse that “it was impossible to ignore the fact that Guatemala needs the cooperation of North Americans to solve satisfactorily the many problems which are essential for the progress of the country”.⁴¹

By the end of January 1931, Whitehouse looked forward to Ubico’s presidency with careful optimism. His only major concern was that the old political crooks would try something to “remove General Ubico to a better world”. This, he expected, would lead to “utter chaos”. If Ubico would be able to “fill out his term”, the minister believed that he would “leave Guatemala a prosperous little country”.⁴² This statement suggests that Whitehouse expected Ubico to fill out his term and then leave the presidency. Such expectations were justified by Ubico’s own promise that he would change Guatemala’s electoral law to prevent “old abuses” that enabled the government to remain in power “against the popular will”. This, according to Whitehouse, would remove “one of the principle causes of revolution”, making Guatemala a more stable country.⁴³

After Ubico was, inevitably, elected, Whitehouse rejoiced that the General would be an excellent, and therefore atypical, Guatemalan president. Despite the special conditions under which the General would be elected, Whitehouse did not doubt that Ubico was the choice of the people. Neither did the minister believe that the General would abuse his power to enrich himself or to stay in power. At least as far as Whitehouse was concerned, Jorge Ubico was the honestly elected head of state of Guatemala. He did not use the word “dictatorship” for months to come.

Toward the end of 1932, after Ubico had been in power for some months, the U.S. Army Attaché in Guatemala, one captain Harris, reported that the Ubico administration represented a “truly (...) radical innovation for Guatemala”. The captain mainly quoted Ubico’s honesty and efficiency in support of this claim.⁴⁴ There is every indication to

³⁸ *Idem.*

³⁹ *Idem.*

⁴⁰ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, January 28, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1053).

⁴¹ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, January 29, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1054).

⁴² Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, January 28, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1053).

⁴³ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, January 29, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1054).

⁴⁴ A.R. Harris (Military Attaché, Central America) to the Secretary of War, n.d. (December 1932) (M1280, Roll 3, Revolutions 75).

believe that the legation agreed with the attaché on the revolutionary (in the sense of progressive or innovative) nature of the Ubico administration.

In part, the American perception of the revolutionary quality of Ubico's administration was due to his official policy of government honesty. Minister Whitehouse was very prejudiced about the sobriety and honesty of Guatemalan politicians. He and his colleagues at the legation appreciated that, much like them, Ubico was "disgusted" with the corruption of his predecessors.⁴⁵ When Ubico was sworn into the presidency, he had an American accountant's firm make an inventory of his possessions. In that way, his wealth at the end of his term could be compared with that at the beginning of his term. The president expected his subordinates to do the same and in April 1931 he introduced the Law of Honesty (*Ley de Probidad*) to fight corruption in government circles.⁴⁶ While these measures undoubtedly caused some resentment in a country where "gratuities" were considered an acceptable addition to the low wage of many civil servants, the legation may have been too quick in identifying opponents of Ubico as disgruntled grafters. For example, in August 1931, Whitehouse admitted that two men who had recently been accused of graft were political enemies of Ubico and hence, many people felt that the official stress on honesty was "nothing more than an attempt to discredit and eliminate political opponents". However, said the minister, "[o]fficial dishonesty and theft were so widespread and had so many ramifications during the preceding administration that it will be virtually impossible to punish all alike. The action of the government will certainly engender a spirit of resentment and revenge among politicians who feel themselves discriminated against and this may cause them to engage in subversive activities".⁴⁷

A second point that characterized the Ubico administration, according to the legation, was his "strength", "effectiveness", "firmness", "energy", etc. One cannot escape the impression that these terms, which are commonly used to describe Ubico in many reports, sometimes act as euphemisms for the more authoritarian aspects of his rule. While the American legation under Whitehouse rarely (if at all) went so far as to suggest that Ubico's "firmness" bordered on the authoritarian, the army attaché in the same period did admit that Ubico was also "violent", "ruthless", "harsh", and even "autocratic".⁴⁸ However, neither the legation nor the military attachés regarded this aspect of Ubico's rule, whether it is described as "strong" or "autocratic", as a weakness.

⁴⁵ Lieut. Col. Fred T. Cruz (U.S. Military Attaché to Guatemala) to Military Intelligence Division, Report 1117, March 10, 1931 (M1280, Roll 4, Palma, Baudilio 11).

⁴⁶ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, April 7, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1) Political Affairs 1062. In a 1939 article, Russell Fitzgibbon lauded the Guatemalan law as "one of the most interesting and perhaps significant legislative experiments undertaken by a Latin American government during the entire period of independence". Russell H. Fitzgibbon, "Guatemala's Ley de Probidad", *Pacific Historical Review* 8:1 (March, 1939) 75-80, there 75.

⁴⁷ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, August 4, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1) Political Affairs 1075.

⁴⁸ Fred T. Cruse (Army Attaché, Central America) to the Secretary of War, January 14, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1) Political Affairs 1052; Unknown author (Office of the Naval Attaché, Central America) to the Secretary of War, n.d. (October, 1931) (M1280, Roll 1) Political Affairs 1081; Harris to the Secretary of War, n.d. (February 1933) (M1280, Roll 1) Political Affairs 1102.

In fact, when compared to Whitehouse's evaluation of Chacón, the minister appreciated the fact that Ubico got things done. For example, Whitehouse felt that it was a good thing that Ubico "dominated" the Legislative Assembly, since it enabled the General to enact "good legislation". Among such legislation were measures to balance the budget, fight corruption, or to sign a contract with UFCO, so that the modern port that Whitehouse had been lobbying for since the Chacón days could finally be built.⁴⁹

Whitehouse believed that Guatemala needed a "strong" leader and that Ubico "undoubtedly has the interests of the country at heart". The minister ignored the possibility that the centralization of power that was taking place under Ubico could lead to undesired outcomes. Six months after Ubico was elected to office, Whitehouse for the first time (and apparently the last) admitted that "because of [Ubico's] strong and dominating character and his violent temper (...) the fear is expressed that in time he will become a dictator". However, the minister wrote, Ubico was handicapped by the economic depression and financial difficulties and if he were just given some more time, "a decided improvement in the Government will be brought about".⁵⁰

A last point which was greatly appreciated in Ubico's mode of administration was his progressivism. The greatest innovation in this field was that Ubico did not only develop the capital—as his predecessors had done—but also the backward and neglected countryside. The president's public works projects reached the countryside and he took a personal interest in the well-being of the Indian communities. Early on, the General made it his habit to visit the provinces on annual inspection trips. During those trips, Ubico inspected roads and other projects, dispensed personal justice during mass audiences with the locals; and checked the books of his *jefes políticos* (the military governors of the provinces). Through these visits, the General obtained "first hand information concerning the problems, difficulties and abuses in the outlying sections" and this made "an excellent impression on the people of the provinces" who in the past had been prone to "support revolutionary movements against the Government in the more favored capital city".⁵¹

2.2 Araujo wins in El Salvador

The smallest of all the Central American republics, El Salvador was also one of the richest and most developed countries in the region, thanks to its prosperous coffee plantations. The republic was often said to be ruled by only "14 families" representing the most powerful coffee barons. These "14 families" were in reality an invention of the U.S. press, although there were some 60 families that could be said to dominate the country's economic life. The reins of government were in the hands of a single family, known as the Quiñónez-Menéndez dynasty. While the politicians from this dynasty were looked down upon as parvenus by Salvador's aristocratic coffee planters, the family did make sure to favor the coffee interests and was therefore benignly tolerated by the capitalist

⁴⁹ Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, August 4, 1931 (M1280, Roll 1, Political Affairs 1075).

⁵⁰ *Idem.*

⁵¹ *Idem.*

sections. By the late 1920s, however, the family was under some pressure to open up the political leadership to contenders from other families. Then president Alfonso Quiñónez Molina, who was pressured by the U.S. legation to quit his plans for continuance in office in light of the 1923 Treaty, decided in 1927 to hand over the presidency to one Pío Romero Bosque. The latter was a protégé of president Quiñónez and was expected to merely serve as a front for the continued political dominance of Quiñónez-Menendez family. However, in an amazing *volte-face*, Romero Bosque turned against his former protectors almost as soon as he was installed in the presidential palace. But instead of setting up a ruling dynasty of his own, he announced his absolute determination to have free and fair elections when his term ended in 1931.⁵²

Initially, the American legation did not sympathize with President Romero's plan for free elections. Throughout the early part of 1930, chargé William W. Schott was skeptical about the whole affair:

The longer one observes the progress of the present experiment in "free suffrage" the more apparent become the difficulties which it must encounter in this country of an extremely high percentage of illiteracy and an utter lack of public opinion and political capacity. Republicanism fits the situation rather than democracy and the direction of the administration must be held in the hands of a few. Unfortunately, the few have been politicians, with little interest taken by the land-owners and capitalists.⁵³

Hence, Schott preferred to see a bigger role for the "cultured gentlemen" of the aristocracy who controlled the economic life of the country and were talking constantly about necessary reforms and progress. Schott regretted to report however that these men were not united or organized and that "thus far, they have displayed little courage or initiative or public spirit, to crystallize their thoughts into actions". There was *one* wealthy coffee grower, Arturo Araujo, whose "dream" it was to be swept into office by a wave of popular enthusiasm, but that dream was easily crushed by Schott: "...the masses are not sufficiently politically minded to create a general popular opinion—it does not exist".⁵⁴

As the campaign for the presidency progressed throughout 1930, a confusing array of candidates popped up: Old-school caudillos, landowners, diplomats, and army Generals. Many of them were experienced Salvadoran politicians who were not accustomed to, and did not recognize the necessity for, rallying the voters. Instead, by

⁵² Weaver, *Inside the volcano*, chapter 3; Paige, *Coffee and power*, 18-20; Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To rise in darkness: Revolution, repression, and memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Durham and London 2008) 34-41; James Dunkerly, *The long war. Dictatorship and revolution in El Salvador* (London 1982) 7-14; Phillip Williams and Knut Walker, *Militarization and demilitarization in El Salvador's transition to democracy* (Pittsburgh 1997)15-17.

⁵³ W.W. Schott (chargé in San Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 275, May 28, 1930; National Archives of the United States at College Park, MD; Record Group 84: Foreign Service Post Records, Legation in San Salvador, 1930; Volume 104, class 800: El Salvador. See also: Scott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 212, February 13, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador; Scott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 200, January 16, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800. Hereinafter items from the Post Records are cited as PR San Salvador.

⁵⁴ Scott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 212, February 13, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

complicated maneuvers that had been perfected over decades of political infighting, they attempted to get enough support from influential interest groups to force the president to pick one of them as the next official candidate for executive office.⁵⁵ It is this side of the political picture that Schott reported to Washington, but he did regret that the campaign resolved solely around personalities and not around any sort of momentous cause.⁵⁶ The chargé resolutely refused to report seriously on the popular campaign of Araujo, who “has persisted in an absurd and dangerous campaign to draw the masses. He spreads the doctrine of division of property, and he is reported to have offered cabinet positions to laborers [!]”.⁵⁷

In September of that year, chargé Schott was relieved by minister Robbins, who returned to Salvador after an extended absence.⁵⁸ With this change of personnel, the line of reporting of the legation immediately softened. For one, Robbins considered it possible that Salvador might have a “semblance” of free elections if the president refrained from forcing through his own candidate in the last minute.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the minister started reporting the chances of some of the candidates, if *free* elections were held.

Initially, Robbins was not favorably impressed with the field of candidates that had formed during the previous months. Both military candidates, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and General Antonio Claramount Lucero, enjoyed some respect and support outside of the army, but they were not leadership material according to the U.S. minister. Of the four civilian candidates, only Araujo and Alberto Gomez Zarate seemed to take their campaigns seriously, but the former had squandered his support from the property owners by his stand on labor matters while the latter did not strike Robbins as a particularly strong man. In all, “there is not much to choose from, and each [candidate] is, I think, the equal in ability to the present incumbent [i.e. rather bad]”. Solely for this reason, Robbins suggested that he would follow a policy of not “showing favoritism for any candidate”, and to limit himself to advising president Romero Bosque on steps to be taken to assure orderly and fair elections for all candidates.⁶⁰ The State Department, which favored non-intervention for the sake of broader policy considerations,

⁵⁵ For example: Scott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 212, February 13, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁵⁶ Schott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 291, June 17, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁵⁷ Schott to Secretary of State, Despatch No. 348, September 5, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁵⁸ Warren D. Robbins (United States Minister in San Salvador) to Francis White (Assistant Secretary of State), Telegram No. 36, September 26, 1930; PR San Salvador, Volume 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁵⁹ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 387, November 4, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁶⁰ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 365, September 26, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

naturally informed its minister that such a policy would be acceptable, although it did not educate Robbins on its changing policy guidelines.⁶¹

In the months following, Robbins kept to his pronounced policy, even if his reports started to show a slight bias towards Araujo. Robbins acknowledged that the latter was very popular with the poor and had the best chances of winning a fair election.⁶² Despite Araujo's wooing of the labor vote, the minister may have been comforted by Araujo's announcement that his government would be one for the people (not by the people) and that it would favor equal distribution of work (not of property).⁶³ In the end, Robbins deemed any kind of social overturn or radical revolution unlikely anyway. Perhaps indirectly referring to Araujo's background, the minister noted that: "I cannot help but believe that in this very thickly populated country where practically every acre of land is owned by rich and poor, there is not much chance of a revolution for the reason that there are too many property owners who have much to loose".⁶⁴ Ignoring the chances of social unrest, Robbins's policy of ensuring relatively free and fair elections focused on two stumbling blocs: The intentions of the military and those of President Romero Bosque.

Robbins regarded the threat of a military coup as greater than that of a social revolution.⁶⁵ The capital's chief of police also seems to have been alive to such possibility. Interestingly, the chief believed that the United States would help El Salvador protect itself against its own armed forces and asked Robbins whether he could arrange to have a U.S. cruiser and bombing planes from Nicaragua stand by in case of trouble. While Robbins considered this "rather a large order", he did request the authority from the State Department to call upon such forces in case of an army rebellion in El Salvador.⁶⁶ The Department was, of course, quick and thorough in disabusing its minister of the notion that he had the authority to summon these forces: Under no circumstance would bombing planes be sent to Salvador and a war vessel could only be

⁶¹ Henry L. Stimson (Secretary of State) to Robbins, Telegram No. 22, October 1, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁶² Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 387, November 4, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador and Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 399, December 2, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁶³ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 365, September 26, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 388, November 6, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800.B: Bolshevism. Gould and Lauria-Santiago, *To rise in darkness*, 59, argues that local supporters of Araujo demanded land reform, but that "Whatever Araujismo meant at the local level, in San Salvador Araujo made it clear that he did not favor land reform, and he reduced his claims to one thing: work for all". A more elaborate description of Araujo's ideas is in Dunkerly, *The long war*, 19-21, who argues that the popularity of these ideas was "strictly limited to a closed group of professionals and maverick landlords".

⁶⁴ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 408, December 18, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: Guatemala.

⁶⁵ *Idem*.

⁶⁶ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 393, November 18, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

dispatched on orders from Washington if American lives and property were in direct danger.⁶⁷

Whether Robbins understood how unusual his request was in the context of broader policy is not clear (his initial request was rather nonchalant in tone). Anyway, it did not temper his resolution to discourage any ill-considered military move, although he did change tactics, now opting for diplomacy over gunboats. Following the Orellana military coup in Guatemala, Robbins counseled the Department to withhold recognition from the Orellana regime so that events in Guatemala would not have a negative effect in Salvador.⁶⁸ Some days later, the minister even requested permission to publicly declare that the United States would abide by the Treaty of 1923.⁶⁹ This alone, the embassy hoped, would discourage any plotters from moving against the government. In January, Robbins noted that the example of American policy toward Guatemala was of great help, since the Salvadoran military clique would doubtlessly have committed a coup if Orellana had been recognized.⁷⁰

Up to the start of the elections, Robbins distrusted Romero Bosque and became very concerned that the president would reverse course and “railroad through” his own candidate at the last moment.⁷¹ One week before the elections, Robbins got personally involved and went to have a talk with the president “and in very strong terms urged him to do his utmost to have constitutional elections”. Combining strong terms with flattery, the minister “went so far as to say that [this] would make Salvador famous”.⁷² Even on the eve of the elections, Robbins was “very much in doubt” that president Romero would allow the chips to fall where they may. He was still convinced that Araujo made a good chance to win the elections—his chances had even improved somewhat since one of the military candidates, Hernández Martínez, had joined his ticket as the vice-presidential candidate.⁷³ However, Salvadoran law determined that if a presidential candidate did not get more than 50% of the vote, the National Assembly would determine the winner.⁷⁴ So even if Araujo did receive a plurality of votes, the game was not over yet.

⁶⁷ Stimson to Robbins, Telegram 27, November 20, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁶⁸ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 51, December 18, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: Guatemala.

⁶⁹ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despach 411, December 30, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷⁰ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despach 412, January 2, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador..

⁷¹ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despach 387, November 4, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despach 399, December 2, 1930; PR San Salvador, Vol. 104, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷² Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despach 412, January 2, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷³ Gould, *To rise in darkness*, 60, argues that Romero Bosque himself brokered a deal between Araujo and Martínez

⁷⁴ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 5, January 10, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

On January 12, three anxious days of voting started. The sale of liquor was prohibited⁷⁵ during the voting days and soldiers armed with machine guns patrolled the streets of the capital.⁷⁶ President Romero, instead of meddling in the elections, attended a high mass to pray for peaceful elections.⁷⁷ On the second day of voting, there was a minor crisis when the populist General Claramount called on his colleagues in the army to reject the elections and call for a constitutional convention. The chief of police immediately informed the American legation about this development and Robbins again requested that the Department send a war vessel to Salvador.⁷⁸ Even though Robbins made no mention of American lives being in danger, the Department this time decided to send a cruiser to Corinto, which is in Nicaraguan waters but close enough to Salvador to employ swiftly in case of trouble.⁷⁹ As it turned out, the ship arrived when the crisis was already over. Fortunately, Salvador's many Generals did not have the stomach for a revolution at that time and Claramount eventually decided, in a somewhat melodramatic move, to offer his sword to the president in submission.⁸⁰

In the end, Araujo did get most votes, but not a majority. This meant that the National Assembly would choose a winner from the top three candidates. Happily, Araujo and his allies also secured 39 out of 42 seats in Salvador's Assembly (the elections for national deputies had occurred at the same time as the presidential elections). The number two candidate, Gomez Zarate who had the support of the wealthiest families in Salvador, was not ready to roll over and surrender, however. He and his financial backers gathered an army more fearsome than Claramount's 30 odd General friends: A team of lawyers who would dispute the procedures of the election.⁸¹

Faced with this challenge to his imminent victory, Araujo anxiously told minister Robbins that he could not stand for the behavior of his supporters if the outcome of the elections was contested.⁸² Even though Robbins was not charmed by Araujo's implied threats, he was anxious that Salvador's first truly popular elections—which, incidentally, he believed would reflect favorably on his own track record in Salvador—would end in civil strife. Thus the minister stepped in:

⁷⁵ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 6, January 12, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷⁶ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 9, January 14, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷⁷ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 6, January 12, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷⁸ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 8, January 13, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁷⁹ Stimson to Robbins, Telegram 5, January 14, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸⁰ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 9, January 14, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 423, January 16, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸¹ Robbins to White, Despatch 424, January 16, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸² *Idem.*

On [Araujo] leaving me at three, I sent for a representative of Gomez Zarate and merely said to him, without mentioning that Araujo had been to see me, that I thought it would be a disaster to the country, after reports of free and square elections had been broadcast over the world that these reports should be disproved by a demand for recount or an accusation of fraudulent elections. I further suggested that I thought it would be far better to try and get together with Araujo. He replied that the Zaratistas were willing to do this to which I merely replied that I was very glad.

Both factions took due notice: The next day, Robbins' mere suggestions had been followed up and correctly executed.⁸³ On February 10, the National Assembly unanimously elected Araujo president without intervention from his opponents.⁸⁴

Despite his earlier pessimism, Robbins was now quite pleased about the elections—and about himself. After congratulating the president, the chief of police, and the Salvadoran people in a newspaper article⁸⁵, the minister turned his attention to the State Department, which, in his opinion, had not shown adequate appreciation for the historic events in El Salvador. Somewhat to the minister's distress, the world at large remained oblivious to events in Salvador. Therefore, he wrote personal letters to his contacts in the Department that reveal a lot more about his interpretation of the elections than his carefully worded political reports do. To Michael McDermott, the Chief of the Division of Current Information, Robbins wrote that not one word about the "historic" elections in Salvador had appeared in the American press, and that the only explanation could be that the "young man" at the Salvador desk had "obviously" been "asleep at the switch". The minister hoped that Mac would be a good friend and play this up for all it was worth. In a "Dear Francis" letter to the assistant secretary of state, Robbins noted that free and untrammelled elections had "literally (...) not happened before in the history of Central America" and that he took "a little pride" in making it happen. If the elections were given some publicity, it would show the people of the United States that Salvador was "progressing" while it would give Salvadorans some "confidence in themselves".⁸⁶

⁸³ *Idem*.

⁸⁴ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 15, February 12, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: El Salvador. For background information on the procedure of the elections, see: Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 12, January 20, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 429, January 21, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸⁵ Robbins to White, Despatch 424, January 16, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 445, February 4, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸⁶ Robbins to Michael J. McDermott (Chief, Division of Current Information), January 30, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 114, cl. 891: Public Press; Robbins to White, January 30, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 114, cl. 891: Public Press. On Robbins' pride in seeing the elections successfully executed, see also: Robbins to White, February 17, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador. Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 110-113, agrees that Araujo's election was the first democratic opening in Salvadoran history. Ching, "Patronage and Politics", in: Aldo A. Laura-Santiago & Leigh Binford, *Landscapes of struggle: politics, society, and community in El Salvador* (Pittsburgh 2004) 54-56, is more careful when stating that elections during the Romero Bosque/Araujo governments were more nearly democratic than at anytime before or after.

Aside from a “particular pride in seeing these elections going so smoothly”, Robbins also felt “a considerable satisfaction in seeing Araujo elected”.⁸⁷ Despite his earlier admonition that the legation would not show favor to any candidate, Robbins revealed after the elections that Araujo had always been a “friendly and frequent guest” of his post.⁸⁸ While the minister may have had his own reasons for portraying the future head of state as a good friend of the legation, Araujo’s recourse to the legation during his run-in with the Zarate faction seems to confirm that he was not shy about visiting the Americans.

Robbins was quite optimistic about the future of Salvador after its “historic” election. Araujo seemed to him “frank” and “honest” and had made a point of advertising his friendship to the United States before the minister on several occasions.⁸⁹ The new president also vehemently denied that he was a communist, as was rumored during the campaigns.⁹⁰ Robbins himself explained that Araujo’s supporters on the countryside may have made promises to the peasants that Araujo never authorized. Many peasants expected the coming of the millennium after Araujo’s election and may have been led to believe that the lands of their masters would be divided among the workers by the new administration. Robbins notes that although Araujo anxiously sought the rural votes, it is unlikely that he ever promised land reform, since he was a rich landowner himself and would be financially devastated by such a move.⁹¹

Robbins’ enthusiasm about Araujo’s election in El Salvador was premature, however. The new president proved unable to deal with the economic and social dislocation that characterized the global Depression.⁹² Not one year passed before he was toppled by a “revolutionary directorate” of young army officers. The directorate soon put General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in power. While the General was initially considered a puppet of the directorate, he quickly and remorselessly built his own power base and stayed in power until 1944.

Parkman, *Nonviolent insurrection*, 16, permits that Araujo was the first member of the Salvadoran elite who demonstrated the power of popular politics.

⁸⁷ Robbins to White, February 17, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸⁸ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 431, January 23, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁸⁹ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 457, March 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 431, January 23, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Robbins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 15, February 12, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁹⁰ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 436, January 29, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁹¹ Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 471, March 27, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁹² In Araujo’s defense, Gould and Lauria-Santiago, *To rise in darkness*, 92, argues that “he [Araujo] faced an elite that would not pay taxes; a middle class that would not allow more foreign loans; foreign banks that would not loan money easily; a U.S. customs receivership; and an ineffective public service infrastructure with a long tradition of graft and corruption. A mobilized *campesinado* expected and demanded agrarian reform, but only a small amount of land was available for redistribution without confronting the oligarchy”. Williams and Walter, *Militarization*, 17-19, present a similar argument.

2.3 *Carías wins in Honduras*

“Honduran political history through the late 19th and early 20th centuries is such a welter of confusion that it is tempting to avoid analysis and present, instead, a satiric panorama of tinpot Generals playing musical chairs.” This, at least, is the opinion of Honduras’ most sympathetic American chronicler.⁹³ Indeed, by the early 1930s the situation in Honduras was very unsettled. Divisions in the ruling Liberal Party; the worldwide Depression; the growing power and economic dominance of the American fruit companies; and numerous revolts by local political bosses all conspired to upset the political and economic life of the republic. To the officers at the American legation, these conditions seemed inherent to the land and its people, rather than determined by any external factors. “When rumors of an impending revolutions (...) do not circulate”, commented the legation’s first secretary, Laurence Higgins, “there is cause for wonderment. They are indeed an almost chronic and constant feature of the political life in Honduras”.⁹⁴

From 1930 onward, the contending parties of Liberals and Nationals (also known by their party colors: The Reds and the Blues) were sizing each other up for the presidential elections in 1932. Between 1930 and 1932, there were two important stepping stones on the way to the presidential palace: The elections for the National Assembly in 1930 and the municipal elections in 1931. Somewhat to the surprise of the American legation, the Liberal president of Honduras, Vicente Mejía Colindres, allowed both elections to be free and fair and the National Party won both of them.

It is not entirely clear why president Mejía Colindres allowed the elections to be free. Granted, he himself, as well as his predecessor, had won the presidency after somewhat free elections, but due to Honduras’ “*doble vida*” of a nominally democratic system combined with a party system based on patronage, both those elections had been violently contested by those who couldn’t obtain lucrative government positions. So in the Honduran context, what was necessary to win an election *and* to actually win the presidency was not just a majority of votes, but also a power base anchored in solid patronage network (there was some overlap in these two factors, but the strength of one’s patronage network was not necessarily determined by numerical strength). Mejía Colindres himself seemed to have lost his own power base by 1930. Both the Nationals and a rival group in his own Liberal Party were now pressuring him to allow free elections.⁹⁵

⁹³ Acker, *Honduras*, 69.

⁹⁴ Laurance Higgins (Chargé d’Affaires a.i.) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 365, December 9, 1931, PR Honduras (Strictly Confidential files), Vol. 216.

⁹⁵ Morris, *Caudillo politics*, 1-11; Marvin Barahona, *La influencia de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1900-1954). Del Tratado de 1907 a la Bananera de 1954* (PhD thesis: Nijmegen 1999) 109-113. In the past, another source of American support had been the banana companies which dominated Honduras’ economy. During election times, competing banana companies would often financially support their own favorites, which is why their backing was so important to the presidential hopefuls. By 1932, however, the United Fruit Company had pushed out the rival banana companies in Honduras, thereby obviating the need to “buy” one of the political parties during election time. Whoever now won the elections would have to deal with UFCO anyway.

Lay's loose definition and benign vision of intervention, coupled with his patronizing attitude toward Hondurans, seem to have had the effect of emboldening him to assume an active role in the 1932 elections. He was determined to make sure that whoever won the elections did so by means of "votes rather than bullets".⁹⁶ As far as shorthands go, this was a fair representation of the State Department's policy of abiding by the 1923 Treaty. However, Lay's conception of the American role in bringing about a peaceful and fair election was an activist's one.

During the 1932 presidential elections, there were two candidates from whom the legation might have chosen a favorite: The National Party's candidate was Tubircio Carías. The Liberal Party was represented by the leader of its "radical" wing: Ángel Zúñiga Huete. It should be noted that neither of them was an Arturo Araujo. Both of these men were traditional rulers of the caudillo type and both had in the past used violence when they believed it suited their interests.⁹⁷ In terms of politics, it is undeniable that the State Department preferred the conservative and pro-American National Party. The Liberal Party, especially its radical wing under Zúñiga Huete, was considered too pro-labor, anti-United Fruit, and even anti-American. Moreover, the Department appreciated Carías' cooperation in the U.S. led negotiations during the presidential elections of 1924 and the dignified acceptance of his loss of the 1928 elections.⁹⁸ Zúñiga Huete, on the other hand, was considered an opportunistic labor agitator and was vaguely remembered for his alleged role in the "machine gunning" of Carías voters in 1924.⁹⁹

For the man on the spot, however, the lines between good and bad were not so clearly drawn. Julius Lay did not acknowledge any serious ideological difference between the Liberal and National Parties and considered the presidential election to be a simple contest between the "ins" and the "outs" (though both presidential candidates could be considered "outs" at this particular time). The minister naturally judged the contenders by the supposed merits of their personal characteristics instead of their ideological backgrounds. To Lay and his secretaries, Carías seemed to represent all that was backward in Honduras: The General always seemed uncomfortable at official occasions, he was a bad public speaker, and during his campaign he did not stir from his plantation in rural Zambrano. Being unfamiliar with the situation outside the capital, the legation had no way of knowing that Carías was building an impressive patronage network since at least 1924 and Zambrano was a perfect location from where to manage it. To the Americans, his campaigning techniques seemed rudimentary when compared to those of his competitor. Moreover, Carías was somewhat of an outlandish appearance: He was a very large man—said to be able to break a rifle in two with his bare hands—

⁹⁶ Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 135, June 30, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.

⁹⁷ On Carías before 1931: Dodd, *Carías*, 15-47 and Argueta, *Carías*, 21-77. On Zúñiga Huete: Argueta, *Carías*, 295-299.

⁹⁸ On 1924 elections: Leonard, *Central America*, 83-84.

⁹⁹ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 474, May 7, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

sporting a haystack mustache and having dark, brooding eyes. Carías' rustic appearance led Lay to believe that "his blood is probably mostly Indian and he evinces a good proportion of the characteristics of the Honduran Indian, who is a very low type of Indian". Concurrently, the minister deducted that Carías was not a very intelligent man.¹⁰⁰

Zúñiga Huete's campaign, on the other hand, consisted of a rather busy schedule of speeches and other public appearances in Honduras' major towns and commercial centers. He even used airplanes and movies to reach as many people as possible. The Americans considered his campaign quite "modern" and assumed that it would win him many votes. Moreover, Zúñiga Huete thought he had a realistic chance to win the elections "the hard way": By a plurality of votes. Being so close to the presidency, he was not prepared to risk losing it to meddling *yanquis*. So, as the presidential campaigns progressed, Zúñiga Huete toned down his pro-labor and anti-UFCO rhetoric, thereby disappointing many laborers but gaining some of the company's trust in return. He also made a point of visiting the American legation to advertise his peaceful intentions. These efforts bore fruit: In a candid letter to Whitehouse, Lay admitted that "there are many here who fear [Zúñiga Huete's] radical and dictatorial methods if he should become president, but he is an intelligent and forceful character and has learned much in the last few years and I am not so sure that he would not be an excellent president for Honduras and treat American interests with consideration."¹⁰¹

It is remarkable that Lay never confessed his reappraisal of Zúñiga Huete to the State Department. Perhaps he was not sure that his superiors would accept his analysis, since the Liberal leader was generally known in Washington as a trouble maker. It seems fair to conclude, however, that minister Lay had no real favorite in the presidential elections of 1932. His behavior during the elections, as it has been recorded in the legation's archives, also appears free of any intentional partiality. But despite being a fairly neutral player in the events of 1932, Lay was anything but a passive bystander. He was very much interested in ensuring free and fair elections in Honduras.

Judging that president Mejía did not have the strength of character, or even the intelligence, to control all the facets of government policy, the U.S. legation under Lay claimed a central role in the conduct of state. Assuming that the Honduran state needed secure borders, friendly neighbors, and internal peace to even have a shot at free elections, the legation played a part in the obtainment of these objectives that went far

¹⁰⁰ Dodd, *Carías*, 15-16 and 46; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 622, September 23, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 731, March 3, 1933, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 218; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 559, July 15, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰¹ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 622, September 23, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 613, September 4, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 504, June 10, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 443, April 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 483, May 20, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to Whitehouse, April 28, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

beyond a mere mediatory role. From 1930 to 1932, it pushed the Honduran government to negotiate border agreements with Guatemala and Nicaragua; had its own personnel inspect the borders with Nicaragua to insure that it was adequately guarded from incursions by Sandinista troops; and took on a coordinating role during two armed rebellions, one led by the Indian leader Gregorio Ferrara and the other by the disgruntled National Party caudillo Díaz Zalaye, giving orders to local Honduran commanders through its network of consulates.¹⁰²

The official campaign for the Honduran presidential elections in October, 1932, began in earnest in March of that year. President Mejía Colindres proved himself to be an honest proponent of free and fair elections throughout the whole ordeal, but despite his efforts, the months leading up to the election proved tense. One source of worry was a minor uprising on Honduras' North Coast, but an even more serious problem was the distrust between the contending parties. The Liberal Party controlled the executive arm of the government, which included the regional offices of the *jefes políticos* who were in charge of keeping order during the elections. While president Mejía was adamant that elections should be free and fair, not all Liberals agreed with him and there was some suspicion that the local governors would coerce voters into support for Zúñiga Huete. On the other hand, the National Party controlled the municipal authorities, which organized the actual voting, giving the Liberals their own reasons to suspect fraud during the upcoming elections. While both parties were fully convinced that they enjoyed majority support among the populace, both also expected that the other would cheat them out of

¹⁰² Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 598, August 18, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 613, September 4, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Major P.C. Geyer, Jr., (U.S. Naval Attaché) to Lay, January 26, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 179, cl. 800: Nicaragua; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 180, January 26, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 179, cl. 800: Nicaragua; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 107, May 21, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Stimson to Lay, Telegram 45, May 24, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 100, May 17, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 76, April 27, 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.; Lay to Whitehouse, April 8, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras; Lay to Robbins, April 8, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras; Lay to President Mejía Colindres, April 14, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 58, April 18, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 59, April 18, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Stimson to Lay, Telegram 23, April 19, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 61, April 19, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 64, February 21, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to Whitehouse, April 11, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Whitehouse to Lay, April 13, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to Thomas C. Wasson (vice consul, Puerto Cortes), April 23, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the North Coast consulates, September 19, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 156, September 13, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Lay to Whitehouse, June 10, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.; Whitehouse to Lay, June 11, 1931, PR Honduras, Vol. 178, cl. 800: Honduras. Telegrams.

a fair election victory. Therefore, they were at the same time running an election campaign and arming their followers in case the opposing party committed fraud. A particularly ominous sign, in the Honduran context, was that Zúñiga Huete ordered large quantities of red lint for the production of hatbands.¹⁰³

Julius Lay, in the meantime, was royally fed up with the “bitter mudslinging” and “partisan attacks” that characterized the campaigns. The uprising in the North was beyond his capability to understand, as he could not grasp how its leader could be so “unpatriotic” as to start trouble during the election season. He also regretted that the contending parties focused on mutual suspicions rather than the “real issues” and found that their reciprocal accusations were “petty” and “childish”. While the minister respected Mejía Colindres’ effort to have free elections and was also convinced of the latter’s sincerity, he believed that the president lacked “severity”. As Lay saw it, the “childish” presidential hopefuls needed a firm, fatherly hand to ensure that they would be on their best behavior during the elections. He also believed that the lofty end of free elections justified the means by which that goal was accomplished. But president Mejía was a much too mild-mannered man to provide such guidance. “It is unfortunate that the Government has not proven itself strong enough”, Lay reported to the State Department, “to accomplish many of the aims for which the Legation has striven”.¹⁰⁴

This last remark hints at the depth of the involvement of Lay’s legation in the elections. Having found Mejía Colindres willing but, in Lay’s opinion, unable to control the strong forces unleashed by the election campaigns, the minister decided that the American legation should be the enforcer of order and the guarantor of untrammelled elections. And so, throughout 1932, Lay and the legation’s secretary, Laurence Higgins, appeared regularly at the president’s desk with friendly, if somewhat insistent, advice. In turn, both Zúñiga Huete and Carías were regular guests of the legation, doubtlessly in an effort to manipulate the favor of those meddling *yanquis*, but in no position to ignore Lay’s counsel unless they were willing to risk American displeasure.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 636, October 14, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 589, August 4, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 559, July 15, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 646, October 27, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with Doctors Salvador Aguirre and Antonio Rivera, July 27, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰⁴ Lay to Wasson, February 12, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 589, August 4, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 596, August 15, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 602, August 26, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 646, October 27, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰⁵ Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 515, June 20, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Antonio Rivera, June 22, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 483, May 20, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 596, August 15, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with President Mejía, July 13, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras,

Lay's actions in favor of the elections ranged from his insistence that the candidates publish a statement on their peaceful intentions to his coordinating role in the containment of the North Coast uprising. Much was also accomplished by legation secretary Higgins who, in his own words, played an "instrumental" role in preventing the establishment of general martial law, which Mejía Colindres thought necessary to fight the North Coast uprising—and which would have made fair elections an unlikely event. Also, the secretary cajoled the president into decreeing a general disarmament of the population, which was in conflict with Honduran law and was unlikely to be enforced by the country's badly armed police force anyway, but which, again in Higgins' terms, would have a benign effect on the country's stability. As the campaigning season neared its climax and both parties seemed ready for a fight, Lay managed on October 28—one day before the voting started—to convince both Carías and Zúñiga Huete to instruct the Nationalist municipalities and the Liberal governors to ensure free election. To Lay's regret, however, neither candidate instructed his followers to accept the *outcome* of the election.¹⁰⁶

On October 29, three anxious days of voting started. Expecting trouble, many of the well-to-do of Tegucigalpa left the country like rats would a sinking ship. Having picked up rumors that the National Party was not at all sure of victory at the voting booths anymore and was preparing to fight, Lay had requested two weeks before that a "planeload of Marines" be sent to Tegucigalpa to protect the legation. Having consulted the legation's archives, the minister was under the impression that this was normal procedure, but Stimson telegraphed him that the Department was "highly reluctant" to honor his request unless American lives were in actual danger. Until such time, the best

January to June; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 569, July 22, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 634, October 13, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with Doctors Salvador Aguirre and Antonio Rivera, July 27, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰⁶ Lay to Wasson, February 12, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 499, June 3, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 569, July 22, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 648, October 28, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 483, May 20, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 486, May 21, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with the President, May 25, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to Whitehouse, June 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to Wasson, June 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins, Memorandum of Conversation with the Foreign Minister with regard to the Politico-Military Situation, June 6, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Telegram 48, June 7, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to Wasson, June 6, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 499, June 10, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

that resident Americans could do was to go the way many of their rich Honduran neighbors had gone, viz. out of harm's way.¹⁰⁷

In the end, the elections went along smoothly, except for the "more or less usual choppings and killings due to excessive drink among the lower classes". To Lay's considerable astonishment, Carías won the elections by a large margin. Since the attendant elections for Congress also brought in a large National majority, there was no (legal) way that the Liberals could prevent the inauguration of the new president. Faced with utter defeat in a fair contest, Zúñiga Huete had no choice but to be a good sport and accept the outcome. To Lay's relief, he told his followers to do likewise.¹⁰⁸

Some days after the elections, Lay sent in a report with his analysis of the elections. Of the factors that Lay identified as having promoted free elections (which he characterized as a "most extraordinary turn of events") the majority was the work of the legation: The pre-election statements of good-will by the candidates; stricter adherence to the gun laws; and an unusually firm attitude on the side of Mejía Colindres. Correspondingly, reported Lay, many people felt that "somehow" the legation was responsible for the peaceful elections. Not surprisingly, then, the minister felt that fear for non-recognition or American intervention in case of a revolution were the most important enablers of this recent exercise in democracy. Though no intervention had been contemplated by the Department, Lay recounts that the showing of a film portraying American naval maneuvers in a Tegucigalpan theatre days before the elections had started the rumor that an American aircraft carrier was actually in Honduran waters and ready to intervene. While Lay admitted that such an event "at first blush must appear trivial", yet "in a country as small and primitive as this and with a population so impressionable and credulous [it] may have been of real importance". Anyway, the mere specter of American intervention "had an undeniably salutary effect" on local passions.¹⁰⁹

When the elections turned out to be a resounding success, minister Lay, much like his colleagues in Guatemala and Salvador, made sure his seniors in Washington understood the central role he played in this local victory for democracy. As a reflection of the importance that local actors ascribed to the legation's responsibility for the elections, President-elect Carías visited Lay to thank him for his good works. Only after Carías made this official call on the legation did he visit the presidential palace to confer with President Mejía Colindres. Lay forwarded articles from the Liberal Press lauding his

¹⁰⁷ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 636, October 14, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Higgins, Notes on the Presidential Campaign of 1928 taken from the Legation Records, n.d. (November/December, 1932), PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Stimson to Lay, Telegram 47, October 28, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰⁸ Lay to Edwin C. Wilson (Chief, Division of Latin American Affairs), November 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Kenneth S. Schraud (vice consul, Tela) to Lay, Despatch 89, January 31, 1933; PR Honduras, Vo. 196, cl. 800: Honduras; Lay to the Central American legations, October 31, 1932; PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 649, October 31, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June.

¹⁰⁹ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 651, November 4, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December.

actions in favor of Honduran democracy and some effusive congratulations from the consulates. "It is pleasing for me to hear", Lay wrote the Department in a faux-humble tone, "that my efforts to secure peaceful elections are considered fruitful".¹¹⁰ The minister optimistically reported that the latest elections represented "an extension of democracy in Honduras". He praised Zúñiga Huete for his graceful acceptance of the results, opining that this would improve the latter's chances for the 1936 elections. All-in-all, the successful experience in electoral politics would bring "another four years of peace" to Honduras.¹¹¹

Unfortunately for Lay, the rosy picture he painted was not entirely accurate. In fact, it was not accurate at all. Two weeks after the elections, the government barracks in San Pedro Sula, a Liberal stronghold, were attacked and taken by surprise. This turned out to be the opening shot in a country-wide uprising by Liberal military leaders who could not accept the recent victory of the National Party. In line with the fine Honduran tradition of providing dramatic sounding names even to the most insignificant skirmish, the fighting that took place in late 1932 was later dubbed the "Revolution of the Treacheries" because, as the American Naval Attaché reported, Hondurans felt that there was no legitimate reason to revolt.¹¹²

However this may be, minister Lay surely felt betrayed and he was not willing to have the Liberals snatch defeat from the jaws of his recent democratic victory. Things did not look particularly bright, though. Honduras did not have an army in the usual sense of the word: Rather, both political parties had their own militias. Since it was the Liberal militias that revolted, President Mejía Colindres had no troops to put down the revolt. Thus, the legation immediately instructed the President to work with the National militias and may have been instrumental in brokering a deal between Carías and Mejía Colindres to fight the rebels. Also, and despite having suffered a rebuff of a similar request during the elections, Lay pressed the Department to send weapons to Honduras to protect the constitutional government, arguing that "timely foreign aid (such as supplying arms to the Government) in suppressing the rebellion would be greatly preferable to letting things drift until the presence of foreign armed forces on Honduran soil might become necessary". At first, the Department was non-committal, claiming that it did not even have the antiquated ammo and weapons requested by the Honduran government. Eventually, however, Francis White decided to send some much-delayed

¹¹⁰ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 653, November 8, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December.

¹¹¹ Lay to Edwin C. Wilson (Chief, Division of Latin American Affairs), November 4, 1931; PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras, November to December; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 649, October 31, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 697, January 13, 1933, PR Honduras, Vol. 196, cl. 800: Honduras; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 653, November 8, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December.

¹¹² Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 682, December 6, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 91, November 12, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Geyer, Memorandum on Honduran Revolution of Treacheries, n.d. (December, 1932), PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December.

policy instructions the Honduran legation: "I think the situation in Honduras is different now from what it was in 1928 when we did supply the Honduran government with certain military supplies. I think it much sounder on the whole that we should keep out of such transactions and that is our policy at present".¹¹³

Aside from an insistent lobby for arms, which was eventually unsuccessful, legation reports give the impression that Lay was deeply involved in the coordination of resistance against the rebels. Apparently without the Department's knowledge or concurrence, he urged his colleagues in Guatemala City and Managua to negotiate a deal whereby the Honduran government would intern political exiles from Guatemala and Nicaragua if the governments in those countries would control the movements of Honduran revolutionaries within their borders in return (Honduran insurgent troops made free use of the uncontrolled borderlands between Honduras and its neighbors). Acting in line with general U.S. policy, Lay also asked Whitehouse to make sure that Ubico did not provide his Liberal brothers in Honduras with arms. And while Lay never admitted that he was in any way involved in the defense of the constituted authorities in Honduras, his reports during the revolt do suggest that the leaders of the National army, Carías and his running-mate Abraham Williams, regularly visited the legation and received advice from the minister. In the end, Lay's efforts were fruitful: After a month and a half of fighting, the National militias defeated the Liberal insurgents. Although President Mejía Colindres was completely dependent on Carías' troops throughout the ordeal, he was kept in power until February 1, 1933, when he duly handed over the presidential sash to Carías.¹¹⁴

In the end, the legation in Honduras was not as enthusiastic about Carías as Whitehouse was about Ubico. In 1932, when the legation was still basking in the success of the election that it helped bring about, Lay reported that "[t]his Legation should be able to get anything it asks for from the new Administration, Congress and Supreme Court except money".¹¹⁵ Such a favorable analysis, however, was not due to Carías' helpfulness. Unlike Ubico, Carías had a more easily recognizable Indian appearance (at least in the eyes of the legation). As Lay himself opined: "his [Carías'] blood is probably mostly Indian and he evinces a good proportion of the characteristics of the Honduran Indian, who is a very low type of Indian". In a fuller explanation of this

¹¹³ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 675, December 2, 1932, PR Honduras (SCF), Vol. 217; Lay to the Secretary of State, Telegram 97, November 18, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 671, November 25, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Geyer, Memorandum on Coup d'Etat attempted by Insurgent Rebels, n.d. (November, 1932), PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Lay to Hanna, December 20, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December; Stimson to Lay, Telegram 58, November 19, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras November to December.

¹¹⁴ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 173, February 3, 1933, PR Honduras, Vol. 196, cl. 800: Honduras.

¹¹⁵ Lay to Edwin C. Wilson (Chief, Division of Latin American Affairs), November 4, 1931; PR Honduras, Vol. 189, cl. 800: Honduras, November to December.

statement that contains all the classic stereotypes of the Indian, Lay explained that Carías:

...is stubborn and unforgiving, easily aroused to anger or resentment, has little education, and has never been outside of Central America. On the other hand he is a natural gentleman, generous, kindly, courteous, and hospitable, a good husband and parent, a patriotic citizen (...) Carías is, I believe, not intelligent, and he is powerfully influenced by the ignorant prejudices of his race, nationality and class, viz. Honduran Indian *campesino* [peasant]. But he is an honest man, an upright man, loyal to his friends, principles and party, and devoted to his relatives (too much so for some of them are thoroughly bad characters.

Furthermore, Carías was not a good “socializer” or “mixer” and did not seem comfortable at society events.¹¹⁶ He had little in common with Lay who liked dinners and cocktail parties as much as the next diplomat, had traveled extensively, and felt himself to be a cosmopolitan member of the highest rungs of society. Unlike Whitehouse and Ubico, who were both “cultured gentlemen” and seemed to get along very well on a personal level, Carías and Lay never became close.

Carías himself was seen as a “figurehead”, a fatherly figure whom the Indian masses could relate to:

He is a great popular figure, trusted and venerated by hundreds of thousands of peons who have never seen him, a Hindenburg to the ignorant soldiers who fought under him in the revolutionary war of 1924 (...) His principal role in the present government is to command popular respect and support. One man no matter how much of a figurehead can accomplish this in a country where politics is a matter of personalities rather than programs or principles.

The substance of government, meanwhile, would be left to the Cabinet, which was “conspicuously superior” to that of Mejía Colindres and formed a “more progressive and enterprising government than the last”. The legation centered its attention on Finance Minister Julio Lozano Díaz, whose job it was to recover the finances of the government—which was almost bankrupted during the heydays of the Depression.¹¹⁷

It is not strange, therefore, that the legation’s hopes never focused on Carías, but rather on the more cosmopolitan and highly educated gentlemen in his government. These, the legation believed, would provide Honduras with an efficient and honest government and four years of much needed peace and stability. A government, in short, that could stand a careful comparison with Ubico’s government. If such a government would turn out to be stern, Lay believed that it would “not be a despotism of one man, for reasons above stated, but an autocratic government directed by the group in President Carías’ entourage; and what Hondurans will lose in their personal liberties (liberties that degenerated into license under Mejía Colindres) they will gain in greater protection to life and property, more efficiency and honesty in the public services”.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 731, March 3, 1933; PR Honduras (Strictly Confidential files) Vol. 218.

¹¹⁷ *Idem.*

¹¹⁸ *Idem.*

3. THE UBICO SOLUTION

If a name were to characterize American policy in Central America during the period around 1930—when the U.S. engaged a measured withdrawal from military intervention while its representatives continued to manage elections in Central America—it should be the “Ubico solution”.

Ubico and Carías established strong, dynamic, and repressive dictatorships in the five to six years following their elections. This process was completed around the middle of the decade, when they both suspended the constitutional prohibition against reelection in their respective countries. Ubico would rule Guatemala until 1944 and Carías presided over Honduras until 1948. In the historiography, both leaders are represented as part of a group of dictators who came to power around this time. In 1932, General Martínez came to power as the result of a military coup against Araujo and Anastasio Somoza established his rule in Nicaragua in 1936.¹¹⁹ The only place in Central America where constitutional and fairly representative government survived was traditionally liberal Costa Rica. Together, Ubico, Carías, Martínez, and, of course, Somoza are considered by many historians to be the beneficiaries of Washington’s “Somoza solution” policy. But this interpretation of events in Central America and Washington’s role therein is anachronistic and simplistic.

The Somoza solution hypothesis is anachronistic because Ubico and Carías were not considered dictators at the time. Neither were they deemed to be of the same class as Martínez and Somoza. First of all, Martínez was regarded as an outcast by American diplomats when he came to power in 1932. Somoza had to wait another four years before he could realize his ultimate ambition to become president of his country. From a 1931 perspective, therefore, the governments of Guatemala and Honduras were not part of a dictatorial bloc. Taking into account developments on the entire isthmus, the elections of Ubico and Carías were seen in conjuncture with the elections of Arturo Araujo in El Salvador and Juan Sacasa in Nicaragua. All of these elections were thought to be remarkably fair and free, thus representing a victory for American policy and a big step forward in the political development of Central America.

All the American legations in Central America in the early 1930s reported that free and fair elections had been held there and that the region was now undergoing, in the words of Military Attaché Harris, a “radical innovation” in honest and efficient government. In this context, it is of particular interest to quote here at some length a State Department study on Latin America, which offered to its readers Washington’s interpretation of its legation’s reports.

Compiled by the Division of American Republic Affairs for the use of the American delegates to the International Conference of American States at Montevideo in 1933, the study in question reached the highest echelons of the State Department, including the new Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, who led the mission.¹²⁰ The section on Nicaragua is

¹¹⁹ See chapters 3 and 4 of this text.

¹²⁰ Division of American Republic Affairs, “Latin America: Politics and Government. Political Résumé for the Use of Delegates to the 7th International Conference of American States,

particularly informative. While Nicaragua presented a special case because it had undergone U.S. military occupation from 1909 to 1933 (with an interlude of 3 years beginning in 1925), it also represented to the Department the highest hopes of what could be achieved under American tutelage.

Just before the report was finished, U.S. Marines were withdrawn from Nicaragua by preannounced plan and as part of a larger drive to remove the vestiges of intervention from Central America and the Caribbean. However, Marines supervised the Nicaraguan presidential elections as recently as 1932—a victory for Juan Bautista Sacasa—leading to a felicitous outcome: “For the first time in the memory of Nicaraguans, the government in power, both president and Congress, is known to represent the freely manifested will of the Nicaraguan people”. Following the elections and the withdrawal of the Marines, the report announced in a victorious tone: “The present generation of Nicaraguans are initiating what is to them a new experiment in self-government”.

The importance attached by the Department to the holding of free and fair elections is evident from its argument that “one of the principal reasons, or pretexts, for revolt in Nicaragua, that is, the desire to overthrow a government illegally or illegitimately exercising power, has disappeared”. And although old rivalries in Nicaragua still presented an obstacle to the “valiant and sincere attempt [of Nicaraguans] to govern themselves”, at least they had the benefit of the “impartial and restraining assistance of the American Legation”.

The factors present in the Department’s evaluation of Nicaraguan politics in 1933—that is, an unprecedented experiment in self-government; stability through periodic elections; and the importance of American “assistance” short of military intervention—also dominated its view of Guatemalan and Honduran politics. In Honduras, the fact that Carías’ election to office was free and fair, was considered “a tribute to the political progress which Honduras had made in the past decade”. And even though the administration of the country depended mainly on the “better element” in the government—primarily the “especially competent” minister of Finance—Carías himself was thought to have a quieting effect on Honduras because he was “respected for his courage, equanimity and political honesty”. Thus, the Department ventured to predict that:

If General Carías is able to complete his administration peaceably, and there are no present indications that he will not, and particularly if he is able to guarantee fair elections at the end of his term in office, Honduras will have made more progress during the present and the preceding two administrations than it has made during any equal period in its political history, and a long step will have been taken toward the development of true institutions and the elimination of the influence of the chronic revolutionary type.

Since Sacasa was thought to be somewhat on the soft side and Cariista Honduras was still considered the most backward country in the region, the government of Jorge Ubico in Guatemala was held in the highest regard by the State Department. In 1933, when there was no reason to assume that Ubico would continue in power past his legal term, the State Department stressed the semi-democratic circumstances under which the General had come to power: “Despite the circumstance that he was not opposed by any other candidate, usually an ominous sign in Central America, there appears to be no doubt that General Ubico was the choice of a large majority of the articulate people of Guatemala”. Citing Ubico’s honesty, energy, intelligence, and ability, the Department’s report rejoiced that “President Ubico has fulfilled his promise to give Guatemala an improved administration” by balancing the budget and enforcing government honesty. Thus, in 1933, the Department regarded Ubico as “the outstanding leader of Central America”.

A remarkable aspect of the American interpretation of the new regimes in Central America is perhaps that the local U.S. ministers easily combined their demand for electoral politics with respect for what would now be regarded as authoritarian policies. So while Whitehouse argued that Ubico was the choice of the “great majority” of Guatemalans, he also respected the General’s “forcefulness” and complete command over the country’s legislative and judiciary. Lay was satisfied that he had set Honduras on the road to democratic progress, but also observed that the Carías regime would have authoritarian qualities. Robbins believed that the election of Araujo in El Salvador was a historic event, but he was also relieved to report the new president could “break some heads” if the need arose. The American ministers perceived a need for “forceful” and “effective” government because they felt that Central Americans needed a stern hand to guide them toward progress. Chacón, Romero Bosque, and Mejía Colindres were considered too weak to deal with the economic and social problems of the Great Depression. In the Lay’s words, the advantage of a strong-armed government at that point was that “what Hondurans will lose in their personal liberties (liberties that degenerated into license under Mejía Colindres) they will gain in greater protection to life and property, more efficiency and honesty in the public services”.¹²¹

American diplomats were not naïve: They knew that the newly elected presidents of Central America were tough *hombres*. It may seem odd that they were confident that Ubico and Carías would submit to honest elections toward the end of their legal tenures. Others seem to have been less optimistic, as Whitehouse admitted when he reported that “the fear is expressed that in time he [Ubico] will become a dictator”. The important thing here is to realize that the ministers did not know that non-intervention—non-interference even—would be the backbone of U.S. policy by 1936. Although they never admitted so much, it is reasonable to assume that they expected the next elections in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to be supervised by a strong U.S. minister, as they had led the early 1930s elections. The multiple requests for armed intervention that have been noted in previous paragraphs demonstrate that the diplomats under

¹²¹ *Idem*.

discussion here had no idea which way the wind was blowing. They could not have known that the Department's tolerance for interference would be drastically reduced by 1936. Nor could they have, for this development required a change of administrations and a thorough reevaluation of policy in Washington. As far as Whitehouse, Robbins, and Lay could see, a paternalistic legation was a fixed element in Central American politics and would ensure that these "tempestuous little countries" remained committed to constitutional government.

