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

Berk, J.H.H. van den

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**Author:** Berk, Jorrit Hubertus Henricus van den

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### Chapter 3

## DEFEAT IN EL SALVADOR One caudillo defies the American legation, 1931-1934

One of a group of Central American dictators supported by the United States, Martínez had won notoriety by presiding over the 1932 Matanza ("massacre"), a slaughter of some 10-30,000 peasants while US and Canadian naval vessels stood offshore and US Marines were alerted in Nicaragua. "It was found unnecessary for the United States forces and British forces to land", US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral William V. Pratt testified before Congress, "as the Salvadoran Government had the situation in hand." Martínez was granted informal recognition at once on the grounds of his success in "having put down the recent disorders" (State Department), with full recognition following in 1934 in defiance of an agreement with the Central American states that military dictators were not to be recognized without free elections...

~Noam Chomsky, 1987<sup>1</sup>

During the 1980s, El Salvador was the scene of one of the most horrid civil wars the region had ever witnessed. Over a period of 12 years, the U.S.-backed military government battled leftist guerillas of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN), resulting in an estimated death toll of 75,000 people. The semi-official death squads, the members of which were often recruited from American-trained army and security divisions, were particularly notorious. One such group called itself the *Maximiliano Hernandez Martínez Brigade*, which was responsible for the assassination of Marxist as well as moderate Christian Democratic politicians. The Reagan administration supported the military regime of El Salvador with money and weapons throughout its tenure, due to the alleged connections between the FMLN and the Marxist regimes of Nicaragua and Cuba.

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<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Turning the tide. U.S. intervention in Central America and the struggle for peace* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.: Boston 1987) 43-44.

Throughout the 1980s the situation in the rest of Central America was not much different from that in El Salvador: Revolutions, civil wars, death squads, and mass killings characterized this period, which became known simply as the “Central American Crisis”. Due to the very controversial involvement of the United States with extreme rightist regimes and groups during the Crisis, historical inquiries into the nature of U.S. involvement in Central America—which had been exceedingly rare before—mushroomed during the ‘80s. Not surprisingly, many historians who dealt with U.S.-Salvadoran relations turned their attention to the early 1930s: That is, the time of Farabundo Martí and Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, the people after which the later Marxist coalition and right-wing death squad were named.<sup>2</sup>

Hernández Martínez became president of El Salvador in 1931, after a military coup had ousted Araujo. Some six weeks after this event, a large peasant uprising broke out in western El Salvador under the nominal leadership of Farabundo Martí, the founder of the Salvadoran Communist Party. Martí was quickly arrested and executed and the uprising was crushed within a matter of days. But that was not the end of it: For weeks after the end of the revolt, Salvadoran army units scoured the countryside, killing anyone who was suspected of being involved in the uprising. Estimates of the numbers killed range from 10,000 to 40,000.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the rise to power of Martínez takes a special and particularly damning place in the narrative of the “Somoza solution” interpretation of U.S.-Central American relations. The current chapter will nuance that interpretation of the events of 1932, arguing that during the two year period in which the Martínez regime went unrecognized, no special concern was voiced either by the legation or the Department over the communist menace in El Salvador. Instead, the Americans fretted over Martínez’ open defiance of American power by clinging to office rather than going the way Orellana had gone some years earlier. In the end, the decision to recognize the General was a negative one: It demonstrated that even though the United States was infinitely more powerful than El Salvador on a global scale, Martínez was the master of his own little piece of the globe where the Americans could not touch him. Especially since the United States labored under the self-imposed restrictions of the Good Neighbor.

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<sup>2</sup> See introduction, pages 8-11.

<sup>3</sup> The classic account on the slaughter is: Thomas P. Anderson, Matanza. The 1932 “slaughter” that traumatized a nation, shaping US-Salvadoran policy to this day (2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Willimantic, CT, 1992). Anderson notes that official documents on the event were all destroyed by the Martínez regime, but, having consulted local sources, believes that 8,000 to 10,000 victims should be a reasonably accurate number (174-176 and 186). Researchers still disagree about the death toll, however: Booth et al., *Understanding Central America*, 47 & 96, estimates 30,000 deaths. Lindo Fuentes, *Remembering*, 40, states that estimates range from 10,000 to 30,000 but that there are no records to establish the exact number. Using numbers from the British legation and other local observers at the time, Gould and Lauria-Santiago, *To rise in darkness*, 233-234, states that 10,000 deaths seems a reasonable estimate. Dunkerly, *The long war*, 29, notes that a minimum of 10,000 and a maximum of 40,000 people were killed, but that 30,000 is the number most cited.

## 1. WHILE THE NAVY WATCHED

The “*Matanza*”, as the slaughter of 1932 came to be known, was largely a Salvadoran affair, but it is undeniable that the United States shares some of the responsibility for the severity of Martínez’ reaction to the uprising. Looking back at the event through the lens of the 1980s, many historians are particularly harsh in their judgment of U.S. actions in the 1930s. Noam Chomsky is a case in point and offers a representative account of the *Matanza* and of American involvement in it. Describing Martínez as “one of a group of Central American dictators supported by the United States”, Chomsky implies that Washington sent its naval vessels to Salvadoran waters to help the regime repress the supposedly communist uprising. That American intervention was ultimately unnecessary is beside the point, because the intention to intervene in itself serves to underscore the fact that Washington supported brutal anticommunist dictators whenever it could. Besides, Chomsky continues, Martínez was rewarded for putting down the revolt. Before the *Matanza*, the United States had refused to recognize Martínez, much like it had refused to recognize the Guatemalan regime of General Orellana, because his rise to power was the result of a military coup, thus violating the 1923 Treaty of Peace and Amity. After the *Matanza*, however, Washington extended “informal recognition” to Martínez, followed by outright recognition two years later—an act that, in practice, destroyed the “agreement with the Central American states that military dictators were not to be recognized without free elections”.

There are alternatives to the interpretation that Chomsky advanced in 1987, but many textbooks on U.S.-Central American relations adopt, in a “matter of fact” tone, the view that the United States supported Martínez during and after the 1932 uprising.<sup>4</sup> Many serious monographs also touch on the subject. Somewhat cryptically, Historian Ralph Woodward claims that American ships were dispatched to Salvadoran waters during the *Matanza* to “assist in averting any Communist revolution”.<sup>5</sup> James Dunkerley, a British specialist in Salvadoran history, writes with more confidence that the “Salvadoran armed forces master-minded and effected the counter-revolution [*Matanza*] by themselves although they had confident expectations of outside [U.S.] support should things go wrong”.<sup>6</sup> Walter LaFeber notes that “the bloodbath (...) changed the mind of Washington officials about the general [Martínez]. Before the slaughter, the State Department had been adamant about non-recognition [but] in a 1932 announcement the U.S. granted Martínez informal recognition”.<sup>7</sup> Professor Phillip Dur argued in 1998 that although the United States had “acted on principle” by not recognizing Martínez in 1931, “the eruption of a communist-tainted rural rebellion in January 1932 changed the whole aspect of things”. And although Washington had to wait two years before it could shelve the 1923 Treaty and recognize Martínez, the ultimate legacy of the episode was that “for

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<sup>4</sup> Black, *The Good Neighbor*, 84-85; Pierce, *Under the Eagle’s Wing*, 20-25. Barry and Preusch, *Central America Factbook*, 200.

<sup>5</sup> Woodward, *Nation Divided*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 75.

several decades [thereafter] realism took priority over idealism in US foreign policy and acceptance became the habitual response to non-communist dictatorships in Latin America”.<sup>8</sup>

Most recently David F. Schmitz, in his study on U.S. policy toward right-wing dictatorship, elaborated on the thesis that Martínez’ brutal repression of a rural uprising led to immediate U.S. recognition:

Responding to what the State Department viewed as a communist revolt in January 1932, the United States would informally recognize the government of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez because he was seen as necessary to stability and anticommunism in the region.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is no known document that directly links the recognition of Martínez with a concern for communism—not on the Department level, not on the legation level. The conclusion that such a link must exist only makes sense as part of a larger argument that the United States supported right-wing dictatorships in Central America as a matter of policy. That conclusion has been debunked in the previous chapter. Hence, it makes sense to revisit the sources and to reinterpret them from a perspective that ignores, as much as possible, our knowledge of the events of the 1980s and focuses on the (limited) knowledge and intentions of historical actors. The picture that emerges from this reinterpretation may be counter-intuitive as far as the relations of power between El Salvador and the United States were concerned: While the weak did what they could, the strong suffered what they must.

## 2. COUP

In November 1931, a new minister arrived in San Salvador: Charles Boyd Curtis. Curtis’ last tour of duty was in the Dominican Republic where he found himself in the midst of a revolution that brought to power Rafael Trujillo—eventually one of the most hated tyrants of the hemisphere. Curtis was personally involved in the negotiations that led to the end of the revolution: He brokered a deal between the government and the rebel forces that included a new provisional government and future elections. While the State Department was satisfied with this outcome, cooperation between Washington and the legation during the revolt was not smooth. Despite standing instructions to the contrary, Curtis cajoled the warring factions into an understanding by threatening to call in the U.S. Marines. After a settlement was reached, Curtis did everything he could to prevent that General Trujillo got elected to the presidency. Trujillo, chief of the Dominican army, had switched allegiance to the rebels during the revolt—an unforgiveable act of treason in the eyes of Curtis. Washington explicitly opposed its minister’s campaign against Trujillo, however. Quoting its nonintervention policy, the Department informed Curtis that it

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<sup>8</sup> Phillip F. Dur, “American diplomacy and the rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (February 1998) 95-119, there 119.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitz, *Thank God*, 57. Further elaborated on pages 117-118 below.

“desires you to know that it expects to recognize Trujillo or any other person coming into office as a result of the coming elections”—which is exactly what ultimately happened.<sup>10</sup>

Curtis’ mission in the Dominican Republic was not a failure, however. Even though his behind-the-scenes attempt to block Trujillo’s rise to power failed, his public role in preventing a major battle between the government and the rebels was a personal victory. According to the American press, the minister had single-handedly prevented major bloodshed, loss of American lives and property, and American intervention in the island republic. *The New York Times* reported that the peaceful solution to the revolt was partly attributable to “the good offices of the American Minister, Charles B. Curtis, who brought the conflicting parties together. It is the first time in Dominican history that such a political dispute has been handled without bloodshed”.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time, *The Washington Post* claimed that “the people [of the Dominican Republic] have the United States to thank” for continued peace and added that “Charles B. Curtis, American Minister, has been the dominant factor in straightening out the dispute without serious disturbances and loss of life”.<sup>12</sup> From Secretary Stimson, Curtis received a letter of commendation for his services in the Dominican Republic. Other members of the Foreign Service sent personal letters of congratulation to the Minister as well. Nevertheless, Curtis’ tenure in the Dominican Republic must have been a strenuous experience, especially because the revolt was quickly followed by a devastating tropical storm. When the diplomat was transferred to El Salvador, the *Washington Post* ventured to predict that it was “altogether probable” that “Mr. Curtis’ new post will offer less excitement”.<sup>13</sup> This was not to be.

Not one month after his arrival, while the Minister was still settling in, a revolution broke out in Salvador that caught the legation and the Department completely off guard. Although Araujo’s popularity had been dwindling for some time, the direct cause of the revolution seems to have been that the government was unable or unwilling to keep payment of the salaries of its officers up to date. As far as the legation could ascertain after the events, it was the young officers of the Zapote fortress and the barracks of the capital that started a revolt in the evening of December 2. President Araujo, whose official residence was directly across the street from the revolting infantry barracks, left town “almost as soon as the first shot was fired”. After some halfhearted attempts to raise troops and put up a fight, the President crossed the border to Guatemala on December 4. By that time, Vice-President Maximiliano Hernández Martínez had taken over the government.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Paul Roorda, *The dictator next door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945* (Durham 1998) 31-62.

<sup>11</sup> “Dominican Rebel becomes President”, *NYT* (March 2, 1930) 9.

<sup>12</sup> “Two little Republics”, *TWP* (March 2, 1930) S1.

<sup>13</sup> “New minister named to El Salvador; Oriental dispatches rumor transfer of Japanese ambassador to China”, *TWP* (August 9, 1931) S1.

<sup>14</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 21, December 5, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution. For historical descriptions of the coup, consult: Anderson, *Matanza*, 71-88; Dunkerley, *Long War*, 18-31; Williams and Walker, *Militarization*, 19-20.

In the meantime, Curtis dutifully implemented the strategy that had made him a hero in the Dominican Republic. He tried to prevent general bloodshed and attacks against American lives and interests by making sure that the revolution developed as smoothly as possible, regardless of who won. Shortly after the shooting started, the Minister occupied himself with visits to the different barracks and forts, trying to organize a cease fire. By the time Curtis got everyone to stop shooting and start talking, the President had long left town and the last resisters were about to surrender to the rebels.<sup>15</sup>

Curtis seems not to have cared which party turned out on top in the revolution, because he regarded both as equally bad. His first analysis of the Araujo administration concluded that it was “weak, inefficient and lacking in much ability to govern”. Shortly after the revolution, Curtis repeated at greater length that:

President Araujo unquestionably showed a high degree of incompetence. While he displayed no great sagacity in the matter of appointments, his handling of the Government finances exceeded all his other mistakes. (...) It seems certain that within a short time the Government would have been bankrupt even if it had stopped payments on its one large loan and all of its small ones.

Even before the revolution, the Minister had predicted that financial difficulties of the government “might easily provoke an entirely different [political] situation over night”. Thus, Curtis believed that the government would have gone down even if the army had not acted. The personal flaws of the President sealed the fate of his administration once a revolution started: “In character he [Araujo] was both obstinate and vacillating (...) The revolution was successful primarily because of his obstinate refusal to believe that he had lost any of the great popularity which he enjoyed at the time of his election to the Presidency”.<sup>16</sup>

In light of his evaluation of the Araujo administration, there is no reason to assume that Curtis felt any incentive to save the doomed government during the revolution. On the other hand, he had no reason to promote the cause of the rebels either. During and right after the revolution, Curtis concluded that the “[g]uiding lights in the revolution are officers who at the moment appear to be incapable and whose only idea is to destroy [the] Government of President Araujo”.<sup>17</sup> At first, says the Minister, the revolution was directed by the younger officers: “youngsters for the most part of strongly Indian blood

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<sup>15</sup> Charles B. Curtis (United States Minister in San Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Telegram 97, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 98, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 100, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 21, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>16</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 21, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 11, November 19, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: General Conditions. Incidentally, this section was censured in *FRUS*.

<sup>17</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 98, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

and with the appearance of being little more than half-witted". Only later was a revolutionary directorate formed with the participation of two senior officers who "appear to be men of some sense and capacity". But the majority of the Directorate was still made up of juniors of whom "the most that can be said is that they appear to be the least worthless of those lieutenants who were the known and apparently the actual organizers of the revolution". When the Directorate appointed Vice-President Martínez to succeed the President, Curtis still assumed that the latter would be a figurehead for the junior officers and that the General "has been allowed to take no action without its [the Directorate's] approval". "Of such a Government it seems impossible to expect much".<sup>18</sup>

Although Curtis' stated purpose was to prevent bloodshed and although he had no reason to prefer one faction over the other, he himself admits that his efforts to negotiate a truce during the revolution had the side effect of aiding the rebels. By the time that Curtis got involved in the revolution, the President had already fled the capital and the rebels controlled the city, "which history shows", the Minister commented, "probably means final success". From that moment on, the rebels only needed to dig in and thus had "more to gain by the delay" offered by Curtis' armistice than the President and his troops had. When the armistice expired, Araujo had already retreated far to the west of the country and was preparing to cross the border to Guatemala.<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime, Curtis' reports on the revolution had reached the highest echelons of the State Department and they were not well received. While Curtis' handling of the crisis was, strictly speaking, correct as far as United States policy and international law in the rest of the world were concerned, Central America presented a special case in light of the 1923 Treaty.

Curtis' reports from Salvador did not mention the Treaty at all. For the first time on December 4 (while Araujo was well underway to the Guatemalan border), Secretary Stimson telegraphed Curtis that the "Department assumes that you have made it amply clear to leaders of the revolution that the policy of this Government is to be guided by the provisions of the 1923 Treaty regarding the non recognition of governments coming into power through revolution".<sup>20</sup> Some hours later, Stimson reminded Curtis that the Department still considered Araujo the constitutional president of Salvador and acidly

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<sup>18</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 21, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution. Incidentally, this section was censured in *FRUS*. On Curtis' assumption that Martínez was *at most* a collaborator of the revolutionaries, and not a very enthusiastic one at that, also see: Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 100, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 105, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 108, December 6, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 109, December 6, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 26, December 15, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: El Salvador.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 97, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 100, December 3, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>20</sup> Stimson to Curtis, Telegram 56, December 4, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

added that “the Department is confident that you appreciate the importance of refraining from any action which might be misinterpreted as favoring the revolutionary party”.<sup>21</sup> The next day, Stimson requested a report on Martínez’ role in the revolt (participation would debar him from recognition) and again urged Curtis to explain the 1923 Treaty to the military faction.<sup>22</sup> Only after this third, rather anxious, plea from the Secretary did Curtis reveal that he regretted to “have to report that I did not bring [the Treaty] to the attention of the revolutionary leaders until the success of the revolution was already certain”. In fact, evidence from the legation’s files indicates that Curtis had not brought up this issue at all and would not do so in the future. His initial justification for this oversight was that:

Anyone who saw the utterly irresponsible youths with whom I had to deal in the beginning, and whose opinions on all subjects except the resignation of President Araujo were as far apart as the two poles, and who saw the almost endless discussion whether an armistice should last for three hours or only two, would appreciate my reasons for forming the opinion that it was futile to mention this subject and that nothing should be mentioned which was not absolutely essential to the obtaining of an agreement on the subject of the armistice.<sup>23</sup>

After he made some more rambling reports, Curtis finally admitted that “[j]ust what exactly the Treaty of 1923 means is not clearly understood by me”.<sup>24</sup>

Not only did Curtis bungle the handling of the revolution itself, he also strengthened Martínez’ position because of his misinterpretation of Department instructions. Stimson’s telegrams to Curtis stressed the importance of the Salvadoran constitution and the 1923 Treaty. What the Department wanted was to prevent anyone who was remotely suspect of participating in a revolution, as Martínez most certainly was, from attaining the presidency in Central America. Only in that way, the Department believed, could revolts and wars in Central America be prevented in the long term. Curtis, who lacked the long term and broad view of U.S. Central American policy, naturally took Department instructions literally. He concluded from his instructions that it was not Martínez who posed a problem; it was the military Directorate that had placed him in power and continued to exist as a rival to the authorities after Martínez took the presidency.<sup>25</sup> The Minister believed that what was necessary to make the government

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<sup>21</sup> Stimson to Curtis, Telegram 57, December 4, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>22</sup> Stimson to Curtis, Telegram 60, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Stimson to Curtis, Telegram 61, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>23</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 21, December 5, 1931; PR San Salvador, Vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>24</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Telegram 109, December 6, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>25</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 25, December 11, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 28, December 15, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution. Acting on the advice of Salvadoran government officials, Curtis reported that Martínez’ assumption of power was entirely constitutional—since he had been elected to office and, as vice-president, had simply acquired the position that was abandoned by Araujo, It was also in concert with 1923 Treaty as the

constitutional and acceptable under the 1923 Treaty was to have the revolutionary military Directorate abolished. Curtis set out to accomplish this goal—with great success.

On December 11, the Minister reported that he:

had conversations almost daily with persons in a position to bring this matter to the attention of General Martínez; I availed myself of a call made upon me by (...) members of the Directorate (...) to make clear to them the desirability of the disappearance of their body; and I yesterday informed (...) [the Minister of War] of my opinion that every indication of even a possibility that the Directorate was influencing the actions of the Government of General Martínez ought to be avoided.

In addition, Curtis urged the Minister of War to transfer former members of the Directorate to distant posts after the dissolution of that body, so that there could be no suspicion that the dissolution was not genuine.<sup>26</sup> When the Directorate did dissolve the next day, Curtis started to refer to the Martínez regime as the “constitutional” government, in stead of “de facto” government, which would have been the more appropriate term from the standpoint of U.S. policy. The legation’s traditional sources, the capital’s upper classes, local media, government employees, and high-ranking military officers, all sang the gospel of the Martínez regime and bashed the former Araujo administration. As far as Curtis could see, Martínez was the choice of the “great majority” of Salvadorans and the army controlled the country in a peaceful manner.<sup>27</sup>

Curtis’ actions would cost him his post and his career: Though just in his early fifties, Salvador was to be Curtis’ last assignment. As it became clear to the Department that Curtis had lost control over the situation as far as U.S. policy was concerned, it moved quickly to replace the senior officers of the legation with more reliable men. On December 5, William J. McCafferty, an officer with six years of experience in Central America and Mexico, was designated second secretary of the legation. Ten days later, Jefferson Caffery, an expert in Central American relations, was assigned to Salvador as a “special adviser”, but in practice quickly took over charge of the legation. While Curtis nominally remained chief of mission until 1932, he was placed on the sidelines as soon as Caffery arrived. Almost immediately, Caffery told Martínez and his Foreign Minister in no uncertain terms that they would never be recognized by the United States. It is

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Salvadoran government understood it—since the Salvadoran Congress had made some hazily-worded amendments to Article 2, which debarred revolutionary leaders from the presidency and since Martínez’ actual participation in the revolution could not be established. Most in-depth accounts by historians tend to agree that Martínez did not take part in the revolution or at least permit that his participation cannot be definitely established. Anderson, *Matanza*, 188; Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection*, 18; Williams and Walker, *Militarization*, 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 25, December 11, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>27</sup> Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 27, December 15, 1931, Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 25, December 11, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 28, December 15, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 26, December 15, 1931, Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 25, December 11, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

indicative of Curtis' handling of the crisis that both were genuinely surprised by the news.<sup>28</sup> Although Caffery rivaled Whitehouse, nemesis of the Orellana government, in vigorousness, his task was made practically impossible by Curtis' previous errors.

In the days after his arrival, Caffery reported that the Martínez regime was "daily growing stronger."<sup>29</sup> The "better elements" in Salvador had already thrown their support behind the Martínez regime (in following dispatches, Caffery confuses this support by the better elements with support by the entire people).<sup>30</sup> The National Assembly, which was still made up entirely of Araujo supporters, had lost much of its credibility when its leader fled the country.<sup>31</sup> There were still the former presidential candidates of the campaign of 1930-1931 who pushed the legation to replace the current government with one of them, but the military faction definitely opposed such a move and, more importantly, the Department and the legation were not willing to back a specific individual for the presidency: Policy had moved too far in the direction of non-intervention for the level of commitment such a move required. In other words, Caffery had no-one to turn to aside from officers of the army, who had firmly established its control over the country before Caffery arrived.<sup>32</sup>

Caffery was sent to Salvador as a trouble-shooter. His job was to save the 1923 Treaty and U.S. policy in the region by finding anyone who could reasonably be recognized according to the rules of the Treaty. His job was not to save the Salvadoran republic or civilian control over it. The Department considered the long-term objective of peace and stability—which the Treaty had provided so far—more important to Central American progress and development than the question of who ruled El Salvador. Therefore, Caffery had no qualms about turning to the military for help: In the short term, it was the only institution that could reasonably be expected to deliver a president.

It was not easy to find an alternative to Martínez in the army. The capable higher officers had joined Martínez' government and were therefore barred from recognition if they should become president. The only group inside the army that had any measure of organization and influence apart from the Generals was the revolutionary military Directorate. Caffery tried to rally this group behind his plan to form a recognizable government, but quickly found that it had been disbanded and its members dispersed

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<sup>28</sup> Jefferson Caffery (Special Advisor to the Legation in San Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Telegram 123, December 22, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 37, December 26, 1931, Curtis to the Secretary of State, Despatch 25, December 11, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>29</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 124, December 23, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>30</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 122, December 19, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>31</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 123, December 22, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 128, December 30, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>32</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 123, December 22, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

throughout the country by Martínez, who, Caffery reported while gracefully omitting Curtis' name, "had been made to believe that it would lead to prompt recognition".<sup>33</sup>

After some two weeks of tough words, negotiations, and public statements, Caffery finally convened a group of young officers whom he presumed were the leaders of the revolution.<sup>34</sup> These young men struck Caffery as friendly and conciliatory and they seemed ready to accept his solution; which was to have a new National Assembly (not dominated by Araujo supporters) elected and then have that assembly elect three new presidential designates who would not be debarred from recognition. The young officers would then have to force Martínez out so that one of the designates could assume the presidency.<sup>35</sup>

This plan, although the only one that had any chance of success, considering Martínez' strong position, was rife with complications from the start: Salvadorans in general felt that the United States was forcing its will on a small nation; the strongest groups in the capital supported Martínez; the latter had some reason to argue that his government was constitutional and that he had done everything Curtis had told him; the younger officers refused to commit to Caffery's plan in writing; and finally, this group itself admitted that it might not be strong enough to force Martínez out when the time came.<sup>36</sup> In this light, it is remarkable that Caffery trusted his new friends to execute "the plan". But Caffery seemed anxious to leave Salvador and told his superiors that the young officers had "a real understanding of what they should do". Despite pleas from the Department that he stay a little while longer, Caffery left in early January.<sup>37</sup> Curtis was told to leave some days later and the legation was left in the hands of second secretary William McCafferty. In this respect, Martínez' ability to hang on to power was perhaps due as much to Curtis' lack of experience in Central American policy as it was to Caffery's haste to negotiate a wobbly deal and leave.

### 3. SLAUGHTER

The Department was confident, throughout the first half of 1932, that it could dislodge Martínez from the presidency as it had dislodged presidents before. This task was left to McCafferty, but even before the chargé could go to work on the plan, Salvadoran history took a sharp turn for the worse.

Uprisings in the Salvadoran countryside had been endemic at least since the administration of Romero Bosque. There was a brief lull during the 1930 presidential

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<sup>33</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 124, December 23, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>34</sup> Intent on describing the "adventurousness" of his diplomatic career, Caffery notes in his unpublished memoirs that "I had a lot of E. Philip Oppenheim's meetings with mysterious officers at aviation fields and so on". Caffery, "Advertures", Caffery Papers, Box 69-b.

<sup>35</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 128, December 30, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution.

<sup>36</sup> Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 128, December 30, 1931, PR El Salvador, vol. 111, cl. 800: Salvadoran Revolution; Caffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 1, January 1, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: El Salvador.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*.

elections as the country's poor peasants entertained some hope that Arturo Araujo would improve their lot. As it became clear, however, that Araujo was unable or unwilling to engage in substantial land reforms, new uprisings started in 1931. At the time, minister Robbins felt that Araujo should act energetically against the demands of the poor—for which he had no sympathy—and eventually expressed his satisfaction that the government had sent out the mounted *Guardia Nacional* to “break some heads”. Araujo's increasingly repressive measures to deal with rural uprisings did not have the effect that Robbins apparently thought they would have. In fact, it led to a complete breakdown of trust in the government and the radicalization of the *campesinados*. This situation was further exacerbated when the military took over the government and on January 23, 1932, a major rural uprising started in western El Salvador.<sup>38</sup>

The course of the 1932 uprising, as well as the question of whether it was led by El Salvador's Communist Party, has been adequately analyzed elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Suffice it to say that the revolting peasants, who were armed mainly with sticks and machetes, were quickly subdued by Salvador's well-organized army and rural police. The quelling of the uprising was just the beginning, however. Fearing that the uprising was a communist attempt to destroy the Salvadoran government as well as its capitalist classes, the Martínez regime reacted with utmost severity. In the weeks following the end of the uprising, machine gun squads scoured the countryside, randomly killing anyone of Indian appearance. The coffee planter class chipped in by forming its own *Guardias Civiles*, which ruthlessly pursued alleged participants of the revolt. Although there are no written sources that record the numbers killed during the uprising and ensuing slaughter, historians estimate that the peasant rebels killed some 50 to 100 people (including government soldiers) while the army killed some 10,000 to 30,000 civilians in response. Whatever the exact numbers may be, it is clear that the *Matanza*, as it came to be known, represented the “single worst episode of state suppression” in the history of Latin America up to that time.<sup>40</sup>

It is undeniable that the legation under chargé McCafferty shared a certain responsibility for the ferocious intensity of the *Matanza*. The chargé was shocked by the unexpected uprising. Throughout the weeks of negotiations with Martínez, the legation had practically ceased paying attention to events on the countryside, even as violence there was increasing throughout the month of December 1931. Also, McCafferty easily accepted the consensus among rich Salvadorans that the uprising was communist-inspired. The chargé did ask Washington to send American war vessels to Salvadoran waters and to maintain that presence for some time, because it would “have the effect of

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<sup>38</sup> Robbins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 468, March 21, 1931, PR El Salvador, Vol. 112, cl. 800: Bolshevism.

<sup>39</sup> As noted before, the classic account is Anderson, *Matanza*. Valuable additions have been made in: Paige, *Coffee and power*, 105-122; Lindo Fuentes et al., *Remembering*, chapter 1; Gould & Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness*, 209-238; Dunkerly, *The long war*, 24-31.

<sup>40</sup> Lindo Fuentes et al., *Remembering*, 61; Gould notes that the *Matanza* is recognized in Latin American historiography “as one of the most lethal acts of repression in the modern history of the region” (210).

allaying the present feeling of panic among the people but would also undoubtedly prevent the de facto authorities from relaxing their repressive measures".<sup>41</sup>

It would not be accurate, however, to argue or to imply that the sending of American warships was akin to American anticommunist interventions in Central America during the Cold War. Neither was it intended to save the Martínez regime. In order to properly understand the American reaction to the uprising in 1932, the context of the early 1930s (rather than the Cold War) is important. How did the American legation perceive the uprising and how was it portrayed to Washington? What would likely have happened had U.S. Marines been deployed in El Salvador?

Considering the first question, it is important to note that the legation's perception of the uprising and the subsequent slaughter was completely one-sided. McCafferty allowed himself to be misinformed about the true events that occurred on the Salvadoran countryside. There is no evidence at all that the chargé ever made a thorough inquiry about the uprising and the subsequent slaughter, let alone that he ever left the capital to see the results of the *Matanza* himself. Neither is there any evidence that McCafferty ever considered investigating the matter after the fact, nor did the Department ever ask him to. Instead, the legation's informers in this case came from the same limited pool of local notables that the legation always tapped for political or economic news.<sup>42</sup>

Blindly accepting the consensus among Salvadoran aristocrats, McCafferty felt that the massacres on the countryside were the work of communists rather than the government. As far as the isolated executions in the capital itself—which claimed the life of Farabundo Martí who was later dubbed a martyr and a folk hero—were concerned, McCafferty believed that the Martínez regime was reluctant to carry these out but had been forced to act by the capitalist classes. The highest death toll that McCafferty ever reported, and which he believed should be ascribed to the communists in any case, was a rumored 4,800 deaths. The chargé reported that this was probably a gross exaggeration.<sup>43</sup>

The description of the uprising as "communistic" should be understood within the context of early twentieth century El Salvador. The divide between the "white" coffee barons and the "Indian" peasants was particularly evident in El Salvador and the upper classes were mortally afraid of the "restlessness" of the masses. Ancient beliefs about the "savagery" of the Indians combined with vague notions that communist agitators

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<sup>41</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 53, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: Communism; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 9, January 20, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 25, January 31, 1932, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism.

<sup>42</sup> On legation sources specifically with regard to the slaughter, consult: McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 53, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: Communism and McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 9, January 20, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism.

<sup>43</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 57G, February 5, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: General Conditions; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 419, March 7, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: El Salvador. Lay notes that reports about massacres are "communist" propaganda.

were continually trying to incite a class war—taken literally as a war—among the peasants. Salvadoran aristocrats did not conceive of a “communistic” uprising among the Indians in geopolitical terms (an attempt by Moscow to expand its sphere of influence) but in terms of plunder, rapine, and murder. Bloodthirsty Indians, incited by too much alcohol and foreign agitators, were thought to be intent on the slaughter of their social betters so that the latter’s lands and properties could be taken. American diplomats, especially those who had spent many years among the Latin American upper classes, tended to subscribe to this particularly apocalyptic interpretation of “communistic” uprisings, routinely quoting the communists’ thirst for plunder and murder, rather than the designs of Comintern.<sup>44</sup>

Against this background, it should be easier to understand the utter panic in San Salvador when the rural uprising was in full swing. During the climax of the uprising, wild rumors about savage hordes of Indians advancing on the capital circulated. The Salvadoran coffee barons, many of whom lived in San Salvador rather than on their estates, were in acute fear of their lives—imagining that everyone in the capital would be slaughtered if the insurgents were not pushed back.<sup>45</sup>

Panic among the locals inevitably touched the foreign colonies. In the characteristically understated tones of a diplomatic report, McCafferty later informed his superiors that “[d]ue to the extremely dangerous situation which existed at the time, many usually calm and sober minded persons became most excited regarding the rapid turn of events”.<sup>46</sup> According to the American chargé, the Italian and the British ministers, the latter being a landowner himself, completely lost their heads, inevitably causing a panic among their compatriots as well. With evident pride, McCafferty reported that the “American colony in the capital behaved admirably throughout the difficulties and their conduct in the face of danger compared most favorably with that of certain natives and other foreigners”.<sup>47</sup> Even though the chargé would not admit that he had ever been in real fear himself, it is clear from his reports that he shared the locals’ nightmarish anticipation of what would happen in the capital if the insurgency was successful:

The sanguinary intent of the Communists, which strangely enough did not seem as in the usual case to require the stimulus of alcohol, was shown in numerous gory and lustful attacks. Women were raped and then butchered, others had their breasts cut off, and men were so hacked by machetes that it was impossible to identify their corpses. Houses were ransacked and others completely destroyed. Shops were looted of all their stocks.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter 1, pages 39-41.

<sup>45</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 9, January 20, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800B: Communism; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 12, January 23, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800B: Communism; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 53, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: Communism.

<sup>46</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 53, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: Communism.

<sup>47</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 57G, February 5, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: General Conditions.

<sup>48</sup> *Idem*.

Against this backdrop, the British and the Italian envoys pleaded with McCafferty for American intervention and the chargé obviously agreed that such a move was necessary, since he relayed the request to Washington. The primary reason for McCafferty's request, therefore, was a very real and acute fear for the safety of local Americans and other foreigners. In this context, it would be hard to imagine that the American legation refused to make a request for armed assistance, or that the State Department would reject it. How would the American public and world opinion at large react if it became known that American, British, and Italian women had been "raped and butchered" and the men hacked to pieces in the streets of San Salvador while the U.S. Navy idled at nearby Panama? Thus, American ships were duly dispatched—accompanied by Canadian vessels. And while there are no sources to document the decision making process in Washington, there is no obvious reason to assume that Secretary Stimson—who carried ultimate responsibility for the sending and withdrawal of the ships—ever considered that the ships should be used for anything except the evacuation of foreigners. It is clear that Stimson was anxious to withdraw the ships as soon as any danger to foreign lives seemed past.<sup>49</sup>

The uprising in western El Salvador lasted a mere 48 hours and by the time American ships arrived in Salvadoran waters, the danger to foreign lives and property appeared to be past. No American marines set foot ashore, although British marines made a brief landing.<sup>50</sup> The question remains what would have happened had American intervention proceeded. Would American soldiers have fought "communist" rebels? Would they have saved the Martínez regime? One can only speculate, but it is informative that the Martínez regime actually felt *less* secure with the arrival of the American navy. Considering the fact that the Americans had opposed him almost from the start and the fact that Marine landings in previous decades had always been followed up by elections and a change of administrations, there is no reason to assume that Martínez would have considered American intervention during the uprising helpful or supportive. This does not mean that the United States does not bear some of the responsibility for the *Matanza*. As Lindo-Fuentes et al. have pointed out, Salvadoran authorities tried to prevent American intervention because they believed that it would be the end of their rule. This fear for American intervention was one ingredient in the mix—which included physical fear of the insurgents—which led the Martínez to lash out against the insurgents "like a wounded animal" and contributed to the apocalyptic nature of the event.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 53, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: Communism; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 17, January 23, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism; Stimson to McCafferty, Telegram 17, January 29, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism; Stimson to McCafferty, Telegram 18, February 1, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800.B: Communism.

<sup>50</sup> A fascinating account on British/Canadian involvement in the affairs is: Leon Zamosc: "The Landing that Never Was: Canadian Marines and the Salvadoran Insurrection of 1932", *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 11:21 (1986) 131-147

<sup>51</sup> "Wounded animal" quote in Lindo Fuentes, *Remembering*, 66. On the very weak position in which Martínez initially found himself, also consult: Ching, "Patronage and Politics", 50-55.

After initial panic died down, the Americans very quickly forgot about the uprising. Both the legation and the Department were evidently satisfied that the revolt had ended without loss of American life and property. Despite their physical nearness to the slaughter, American diplomats remained blissfully unaware of the fact that the *Matanza* was a singularly apocalyptic event that would haunt Salvadoran society for decades to come. Perhaps due to the very unprecedented scale of machine gun killings, they could not have known. Thus, McCafferty was satisfied to limit his reports on the massacre to the “gory and lustful” atrocities committed by the communists.<sup>52</sup>

While the local elites flocked to Martínez as their protector, McCafferty was not about to let his resolve sway. While the chargé respected Martínez’ “cool and collected” attitude during the uprising, he also made sure that the President knew that American policy had not changed. As the machine guns were still bursting and American ships were still in Salvadoran waters, McCafferty spelled out again the pre-uprising policy of the United States to Martínez, even if it was in a little more respectful tone:

I informed the de facto authorities that there is not the slightest animus against Martinez personally on the part of the United States Government but that as has been already made clear the decision regarding the non recognition of his regime is the only possible decision which can be reached in view of the provisions of the 1923 Treaty.<sup>53</sup>

The suppression of the 1932 uprising made McCafferty’s job more difficult, however. General Martínez’ internal political position was enormously strengthened. The Americans were well-aware of this fact, but the Department still had some hope that Martínez’ hold on the reins of power would slacken over time and that there would be another chance to convince him to step down. This turned out to be a mistake. In the end, it was the United States that would have to give in.

#### 4. DEFIANCE

After the initial alarm that accompanied the 1932 uprising, McCafferty quickly reasserted U.S. determination to face down Martínez. In the next five to six months, the chargé and the General engaged in a test of willpower, with McCafferty pressing for an immediate change of governments and Martínez skillfully delaying the matter. Granted, the United States did recognize that a solution to the constitutional problem in El Salvador had to include the army. But this was also the basis of Caffery’s position, so McCafferty’s negotiations with high military officers did not represent a change of policy due to the *Matanza*. Schemes suggested by Salvadoran authorities to get around the spirit of the 1923 Treaty were rejected out of hand. While Washington was willing to accept continued military dominance in El Salvador, it would not compromise the Treaty. Martínez had to leave the presidency.

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<sup>52</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 57G, February 5, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 116, cl. 800: General Conditions.

<sup>53</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 24, January 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition.

This was unacceptable to Martínez. All his efforts in the months following the revolt were aimed at maintaining his position. The President's most-used argument to convince McCafferty that he was irreplaceable was to present himself as a bulwark against communism. But while the Salvadoran aristocracy readily accepted this logic, the U.S. legation and Department were not so easily duped. Although American diplomats acknowledged that they had underestimated the strength of communism, they considered that it was stamped out effectively by Martínez' repression. In other words, as far as the United States was concerned, Martínez' very thorough handling of the uprising had obsoleted him. So when Martínez first employed what would become his government's favorite *spiel*—arguing that he could not reorganize his government or step down due to the risk of another communist uprising—McCafferty countered that, if anything, the repression of the uprising had made the reorganization of the government easier:

[General Martínez] spoke at length on the seriousness of the recent communistic movement and its effect on the neighboring countries and intimated that it would be disastrous at the present time to have a change of executive. I told him that all indications were that the communistic menace had been suppressed at least for the time being and that I did not believe a solution of the present political situation would be difficult if the provisions of the 1923 Treaty were followed in reorganizing the Government.<sup>54</sup>

McCafferty repeated this argument frequently and it must have become clear to Martínez at some point that his anti-communist credentials got him nowhere.<sup>55</sup>

Recent research has demonstrated, however, that anticommunist rhetoric and repression were only two facets of Martínez' campaign to solidify and legitimize his power. Others were his cooptation of the army into politics; the establishment and expansion of a new political party, *Partido Pro Patria*, which served as a patronage network to the new president; and a many-sided popular program to obtain the allegiance of the Indian masses. An indication of the effectiveness of Martínez' political maneuvers is the curious fact that the very Indian communities who suffered the full horror of the *Matanza* in 1932 were the last defenders of the regime against an urban middle-class uprising in 1944.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 28, February 3, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition. McCafferty adds that Martínez "is now beginning to realize that some steps must be taken to reorganize the Government on a basis which will permit of its recognition by other Central American States and the United States".

<sup>55</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, telegram 70, March 22, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 86, June 1, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, dispatch 126G, July 9, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 800: General Conditions; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 118G, June 20, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 80: General Conditions; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 91G, April 21, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 800: General Conditions.

<sup>56</sup> Gould, *To rise in Darkness*, 238-243. A good description of Martínez' success in building a highly effective patronage network from scratch can also be found in: Erik K. Ching, "Patronage and politics under General Maximiliano Martínez, 1931-1939. The local roots of military

Martínez had ample time to strengthen his position, because he had duped McCafferty with a line of arguments that was much more subtle than his anti-communist rhetoric. To establish a stable follow-up government, the wily General argued, it was necessary to unite all the important players behind the *de facto* government. Only then could it guarantee a smooth transfer of power to a diplomatically recognizable government that would have the support of “the people”. In other words, Martínez argued that he needed more power before he could safely rescind it. McCafferty was led on by this and other delaying tactics for several months. With regard to the General’s growing domination over the army, for example, the chargé reported on April 16 that:

Martinez has strengthened his position by his recent appointments of absolutely loyal officers as chief of Police and Chief of the Guardia. He apparently intends to secure complete control of the army by breaking the power of the young military officers who have been causing him much apprehension recently by their threatening attitude. If he succeeds in his plan it will be easier for him to reorganize the Government to admit of recognition. I believe he still intends to step aside but it has been difficult for him to do so because of the many dissensions in the army.<sup>57</sup>

Only by the end of April, 1932, did the legation and the Department realize that they were being played for time and credible excuses for further delays began to run out. When Martínez ingeniously argued that he could not resign in May, because “that was the Communist month”, an exasperated Acting Secretary Castle wondered “what excuse General Martínez will find not to resign in June”.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, once he was strong enough, Martínez did not step down. After five months of negotiations, Martínez decided that he would forego a compromise with the Yankees. In June, despite earlier promises to the contrary, the General announced that he would serve out Araujo’s term without seeking recognition. Both the legation and the State Department had been anticipating this move for several days so it did not come as a complete shock. The realization that Martínez had simply been playing a cat and mouse game with them for months did, however, deeply annoy the American diplomats. Quite unaccustomed to successful resistance to American power, the legation and the Department had always assumed that Martínez was just a particularly pig-headed leader of the Orellana type who would have to capitulate to American wishes in the end.<sup>59</sup>

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authoritarianism in El Salvador”, in Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford eds., *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador* (Pittsburgh 200) 50-70, especially 60-69.

<sup>57</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 78, April 16, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition .

<sup>58</sup> McCafferty to Charles C. Eberhardt (U.S. Minister to Costa Rica), May 15, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; William Castle (Acting Secretary of State) To McCafferty, Despatch 34, May 6, 1932, McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition .

<sup>59</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 87, June 8, 1932, McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; Stimson to the U.S. Legations in Central America, June 2, 1932, McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the

Washington's reaction to Martínez' announcement that he would forego recognition led David Schmitz to conclude that the American government extended "informal recognition" to the Salvadoran General after June. This conclusion, which was also put forward (but not substantiated) by other researchers, requires exploration. There are two main arguments for the conclusion that Washington recognized Martínez "unofficially": Firstly, Washington was grateful for the General's repression of the communist uprising. Secondly, the State Department did not escalate its resistance against Martínez after the latter announced that he would remain in office in defiance of American wishes. In fact, the American legation in San Salvador remained open—be it in the hands of a *chargé* rather than a minister.<sup>60</sup>

With regard to the first argument, it is noteworthy, as Schmitz argues, that Stimson wrote in his diary on January 25, 1932 (two days after the start of the uprising), that the "communistic revolution in Salvador (...) produces a rather nasty (...) problem, because the man who is president and who is the only pillar against the success of what seems to be a rather nasty proletarian revolution is Martínez, whom we were unable to recognize under the 1923 rule". However, this statement in itself recognizes the continued primacy of the 1923 Treaty over any immediate concern for the communist danger. Furthermore, by June, 1932, any initial sympathy for Martínez had been eroded by his defiance to American wishes. In a report to McCafferty of June 14, Under-Secretary Francis White explained the feeling in the Department: "We had perhaps felt a little pity in the past that we could not recognize Martínez who had handled the outbreak so well, but that feeling had now vanished in view of the fact that apparently Martínez was a man whose word could not be relied upon. I was therefore inclined to take the position that it was a fortunate thing for us that we had not been able to recognize anyone who would appear to be so unworthy".<sup>61</sup>

Concerning the second argument, it is true that escalating the pressure on Martínez was hardly considered. This decision should be seen in the right context, however: Measures beyond mere non-recognition had never been necessary before and if applied now, would smack of intervention, thus endangering all the good will the Hoover administration had been able to build on its non-intervention policy in Latin America. Simply accepting defeat and extending outright recognition to the Salvadoran regime also seemed out of the question, because it would wreck U.S. policy in Central America, which had been based on the principle of non-recognition of revolutionary governments since 1907. Thus unable to seek Martínez' downfall due to the effect this would have on broader Latin American policy and unable to recognize him due to

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Secretary of State, Despatch 116, June 10, 1932, McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 89, June 13, 1932, McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Telegram 84, May 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition; Francis White (Assistant Secretary of State) to McCafferty, Despatch 48, June 14, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition.

<sup>60</sup> Schmitz, *Thank God*, 57-72.

<sup>61</sup> White to McCafferty, Despatch 48, June 14, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition.

Central American policy, the State Department implicitly decided that the best Salvadoran policy was to have no policy at all. Perhaps there was some hope that Martínez' hold on the reins of power would lessen over time and that there would be a second chance to convince him to step down.

Lastly, it is entirely unclear what "informal" or "unofficial" recognition might mean in practice. By definition, extending diplomatic recognition is a public act—as is withholding recognition. It would take another 18 months (and a change of administrations) before Washington finally recognized Martínez. What could the Department hope to gain by recognizing Martínez informally but not officially? The continued reign of Martínez in defiance of Washington's official and well publicized policy of non-recognition could only hurt the prestige of the United States. If the object of alleged *de facto* recognition was to bolster an anti-communist regime, it is unclear why outright recognition was not considered. After all, if communism was so dangerous, then why let 2 years pass between the 1932 uprising and recognition? Even Joseph Stalin received official diplomatic recognition well before Martínez did.

In fact, the State Department made it clear to Martínez on several occasions throughout 1932 and 1933 that any type of informal relationship or cooperation was out of the question. And while McCafferty remained in Salvador during these long years to collect information and look after American economic and financial interest, he was careful not to associate himself with the regime. The poor chargé got stuck in El Salvador for two years: From Caffery's departure in January, 1932, to Washington's eventual recognition of the Martínez regime in January, 1934. His status was uncertain: He represented his country before a government that, officially, did not exist. He could not be promoted or transferred without raising the impression that U.S. policy toward Martínez had changed. The usual perks that made diplomatic life worth while – the banquets, the social prestige, the mingling with local dignitaries – were off limits for the young chargé. The locals, who had been driven into Martínez' arms after the 1932 uprising, considered McCafferty's presence as a symbol of unwanted U.S. interference in their politics. McCafferty could not join official festivities as his attendance would imply recognition of the local political situation (although his diplomatic colleagues from the other Central American states, which also refused to recognize Martínez, were less conscientious on this point). Even the usual visits to the local country- or golf clubs were out-of-the-question, since the chargé would inevitably be seen there rubbing shoulders with high government officials.<sup>62</sup>

The following eighteen months were hard on Martínez too. McCafferty reported on several occasions that Martínez felt very anxious about the continued state of non-recognition—especially when it became evident that the FDR administration was seeking

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<sup>62</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 244G, January 31, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 364G, October 20, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions; McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 366G, November 4, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions.

a rapprochement with Stalin, but continued to ignore him<sup>63</sup>—and went out of his way to please the *yanquis* on every occasion. American businesses received preferential treatment from the Martínez government. The latter also cleaned up its act by instituting financial conservatism, government honesty, minor social programs, and all the other policies that earned the Ubico government a good reputation with the Americans. In fact, McCafferty opined that “the principal reason for the present good administration in El Salvador is the non-recognition of the United States and (...) General Martínez and his collaborators hope that if they can demonstrate their ability to govern in an efficient manner, they will in time obtain recognition from the American Government”.<sup>64</sup> While this was probably stretching the point, it is clear that Martínez’ behavior was not that of a man who felt secure in the knowledge that the United States unofficially recognized his regime.

Only after the Roosevelt administration had been in office for some months did it become clear that the policy not to recognize undesirable regimes would have to be revised some time in the context of the non-intervention policy. The Central America situation itself also provided impetus for the Americans to come to terms with Martínez. Being signatories to the 1923 Treaty, the Central American neighbors of El Salvador were required to act as if the Martínez regime did not exist. Washington tried to make sure that they acted as such, but in a region where internal politics rarely stopped at the border, this proved to be impossible. First of all, the continued existence of the Martínez regime in defiance to U.S. policy was an inspiration to all ambitious politicians throughout Central America who could not gain the presidency by fair and democratic means. In Guatemala, Whitehouse reported that the Orellana faction now regretted that it had given in to American wishes so easily and appeared to be plotting a return to the presidential palace. In Honduras, Zúñiga Huete was said to have remarked that U.S. recognition was not a necessity any longer and this may well have influenced the decision of the Liberal Party to rebel after its defeat in the 1931 elections. In Nicaragua, President Juan Bautista Sacasa feared the ambitions of General Somoza, who’s appetite for power was undoubtedly wetted by Martínez’ seizure of power. In general, American diplomats feared that Martínez’ example undermined the ability of elected governments to deter coups and thus threatened the entire region’s stability.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 304GC, June 1, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions and McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 314GC, July 1, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions.

<sup>64</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 175, September 26, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: El Salvador.

<sup>65</sup> Both Whitehouse and Lay reported that the example of Martínez gave the Orellana and Zúñiga Huete factions the wrong idea: Whitehouse to Wilson, October 19, 1932, PR Guatemala, Vol. 286, cl. 800: Salvador; Lay to the Secretary of State, Despatch 471, May 5, 1932, PR Honduras, Vol. 188, cl. 800: Honduras, January to June. Additionally, the rise to power of a strong military leader in El Salvador disturbed the fragile balance of power in Central America. Fearing Martínez’ ambitions, Ubico seems to have made plans to send arms to Nicaragua and to seek a rapprochement to Mexico at the possible expense of U.S. influence in Guatemala: G.K. Donald

Then there was the division caused by the existence of the Martínez regime between the Central American states and even between those countries and the United States. President Ubico, who himself had come to power due to the opening that the 1923 Treaty had given him, pronounced himself to be a staunch supporter of the selfsame treaty almost immediately after the December 2 coup in Salvador. Also, the General clearly wanted to endear himself to Washington by presenting himself as a loyal supporter of its regional policy. But while American diplomats appreciated Ubico's support, his enthusiasm for the campaign against Martínez sometimes proved to be embarrassing. Ubico (rightly) opined that a passive policy of mere non-recognition would not bear fruit and pushed the Americans to employ an economic boycott or unspecified "harsher measures" against the Salvadoran General. Such proposals were rejected out-of-hand since, even if they were effective in Salvador, they would endanger U.S. policy in the rest of Latin America. American qualms about more rigorous actions against Salvador annoyed Ubico and hurt American prestige in Guatemala, where, Whitehouse reported, people felt that Martínez had "put something over on the United States".<sup>66</sup>

Carías' position was ambiguous. On the one hand, Honduras traditionally supported the 1923 Treaty because it seemed to be effective in quieting regional conflicts of which the Republic—its territory having served as the battlefield of Central America on many occasions—was often the only true loser. On the other hand, when Carías was fighting the War of Treacheries and was dreadfully low on ammo, Martínez was the only one who was willing to send him a couple of cases of lead.<sup>67</sup> Martínez, of course, was only too eager to make new friends, and although Carías paid for the Salvadoran ammo in cash and made it clear that an ammo-in-exchange-for-recognition deal was out of the question, the Honduran General henceforth seized on every opportunity to show his "unofficial" feelings of friendship for Martínez. In Nicaragua, internal intrigues forced Sacasa to abide by the 1923 Treaty, as mentioned before, but in Costa Rica public sentiment was entirely in sympathy with Martínez. Costa Rica and Salvador had long shared some mutual feelings of respect due to their relatively progressive governments and economies and the *Ticos* could not help but admire Salvador's lone defiance of the Colossus of the North. Besides, Costa Rica was a nation of independent farmers who were shocked by the 1932 "Communist" uprising.<sup>68</sup>

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(U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 667, June 21, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: Guatemala; McCaffery to the Secretary of State, Telegram 97, June 30, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: Guatemala; Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, Despatch 797, October 7, 1932; PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: Guatemala; Whitehouse to the Secretary of State, Despatch 839, December 8, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 117, cl. 800: Guatemala.

<sup>66</sup> G.K. Donald (U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, June 20, 1932, PR El Salvador, Vol. 118, cl. 801: Recognition.

<sup>67</sup> At the time, Washington was unwilling to "intervene" in Honduran affairs by the sending of ammo; the arsenals of Nicaragua were under the supervision of the U.S. Marines; and Ubico publicly supported the 1923 Treaty.

<sup>68</sup> McCafferty to the Secretary of State, Despatch 364G, October 20, 1933, PR EL Salvador, Vol. 122, cl. 800: General Conditions; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 831, July 6, 1933, PR El Salvador, Vol. 123, cl. 800: Honduras; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 833,

It should have been clear to the Roosevelt administration that it only stood to lose from a continuance of Hoover's policy toward Martínez. When Costa Rica and El Salvador jointly announced in 1933 that they would abrogate the 1923 Treaty to clear the way for a renewal of diplomatic relations, the State Department decided to cut its losses and salvage what it could. One thing that needed salvaging was the United States' tattered prestige. It could not capitulate to Martínez outright. And while the details of the diplomatic wrangling that preceded final recognition of the Salvadoran government are murky, it seems clear that the United States pushed Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to jointly extend recognition to Martínez. After the Central American states had taken the initiative, Washington could claim that it would honor the wishes of its regional friends by making amends with Martínez: The whole procedure was thus presented as a mark of respect for the self-determination of the Central American republics and as a great victory for the Good Neighbor.

The State Department also wished to salvage what it could of the 1923 Treaty. Costa Rica and El Salvador had already made it clear that they wished to rid themselves of the Treaty, but it might still be upheld in the case of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Discussions on the recognition of Martínez started at the middle level of the State Department in October, 1933, where it was recognized that the 1923 Treaty was already weakened, whether or not the Salvadoran government was recognized or not. The plan developed to have the three Central American countries that still upheld the 1923 Treaty, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, recognize the Martínez regime and at the same time announce that they would uphold the Treaty among the three of them. The United States would recognize Martínez some days later on the grounds that it supported the effort made by the Central American states themselves to further friendly relations. In fact, none of the Central American governments were consulted on this plan until January, 1934: The United States would lead the entire effort behind the scenes, but wished to uphold the impression that the initiative lay with the sister republics and merely had the "sympathetic interest" of the State Department.<sup>69</sup>

The plan was eventually supported by Sumner Welles—who had first hand experience with the ineffectiveness of non-recognition during his recent mission to Cuba—and the Undersecretary effortlessly got F.D.R. and Hull on board, both of whom seemed rather uninterested in the details of the issue. What followed was a brilliant episode of diplomatic doubletalk, in which the State Department told the Central Americans what to do while piously upholding the impression that it had no intention to intervene in their politics. Juan Bautista Sacasa of Nicaragua was chosen as the one

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July 7, 1933, PR El Salvador, Vol. 123, cl. 800: Honduras; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 891, September 9, 1933, PR El Salvador, Vol. 123, cl. 800: Honduras; Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch, 842, PR El Salvador, Vol. 123, cl. 800.S.

<sup>69</sup> Leo Sack (U.S. Minister to Costa Rica) to the Secretary of State, January 1, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Hull to the U.S. Legations in Central America, January 31, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties; Willard Beaulac (Division of Latin American Affairs), "Procedure for arriving at the recognition of El Salvador by the United States", December 27, 1933, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, Folder: Salvador, 1930-1939.

who would “take the initiative” in suggesting the plan to his colleagues in Honduras and Guatemala. There is some reason to assume that Sacasa was chosen to make it clear to Somoza that the 1923 Treaty still applied to Nicaragua. In any event, Acting Secretary Phillips wrote Minister Lane that it had come to his attention that the Central American states themselves would “in fact be glad to extend recognition” to Martínez. In the light of this feeling among the Central American states, Phillips suggested that Sacasa, Ubico, and Carías “might desire to reach an agreement more or less in the (...) terms” that the Acting Secretary outlined to the Minister.<sup>70</sup>

It turned out that both Sacasa and Carías were indeed glad to follow up on the Department’s suggestions, but Ubico was not. The latter considered El Salvador in General and Martínez in particular as rivals to a position of regional leadership that Ubico coveted for Guatemala in general and himself in particular. Furthermore, the General had faithfully supported the U.S. non-recognition policy toward Martínez and now felt embarrassed that his supposed friend changed course so unexpectedly. Last but not least, Ubico felt that the Department should have chosen him, not Sacasa, to take the initiative in this plan. Some pressure from the American legation was needed to convince Ubico that he was in fact glad to recognize Martínez on his own initiative. On January 25, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua jointly recognized the Martínez regime and at the same time announced that the 1923 Treaty would remain in effect between the three of them. The United States followed suit two days later, presenting the move not as the Martínez victory that it was, but as the sovereign wish of the people of Central America and “an important step in the establishment of normal, friendly relations among all the nations of America”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> On Welles’ mission to Cuba, see: Wood, *The Making*, 30-110; Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy*, 17-28 and 30-31; Howard Jablon, *Crossroads of a decision: The State Department and Foreign Policy, 1933-1937* (Lexington, 1983) 40-44. On the recognition of Martínez: Beaulac to Wilson, October 18, 1933, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1933-1940; Beaulac, Memorandum on Procedure for Arriving at the Recognition of El Salvador by the United State, December 27, 1933, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1933-1940; Welles to President Roosevelt, January 8, 1934, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1933-1940; State Department Press Release, January 26, 1934, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 45, folder marked El Salvador, 1933-1940;

<sup>71</sup> Lawton to the Secretary of State, January 15, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; William Phillips (Acting Secretary of State) to McCafferty, Despatch 1, January 17, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Lawton to the Secretary of State, January 17, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Lane to the Secretary of State, January 25, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Hull to McCafferty, Telegram 4, January 26, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Hull to McCafferty, Telegram 5, January 26, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government; Division of Current Information, Memorandum of Press Conference, Friday, January 26, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 130, cl. 801: Government.

## 5. LESSONS NOT YET LEARNED

In 1934, a Central American conference was held in Guatemala to discuss the future of the Treaty of Peace and Amity in the light of recognition of General Martínez.<sup>72</sup> While Matthew Hanna, the U.S. minister to Guatemala, devoted a respectable amount of political reports to the conference, the event has never been recorded in the history books. The reason for this “oversight” may well be that, in light of later events, the conference was a patently useless exercise in pious declarations on the side of Central American leaders. Hanna took it quite seriously, however. And if nothing else, his reports of the conference demonstrate what he and his colleagues had not yet learned from the defeat in El Salvador.

Ubico gave it all he got. Perhaps still smarting from fact that he was not chosen to lead the negotiations that resulted in the recognition of Martínez, he was determined to demonstrate his credentials for regional leadership during the conference. The delegates of the other Central American nations were welcomed with parades by Guatemala’s finest military units; a twenty-one gun salute; prosaic speeches on Central American unity; and, for good measure, a 30,000 man march through the streets of Guatemala, courtesy of Ubico’s Liberal-Progressive Party. “The size of the parade and its manifest devotion to President Ubico must have made a strong impression on the visiting delegates”, according to Hanna’s dry account.<sup>73</sup>

While the State Department had made clear its intention not to get involved in the conference<sup>74</sup>, Hanna believed that it could well direct the future of the region. While the conference was in fact a product of the breakdown of the 1923 Treaty, Hanna somehow hoped that it could be the beginning of greater Central American unity, stability, and prosperity. The minister took it upon himself to coach the Nicaraguan delegation and, “without being too specific”, lectured it on the possibility “that the Conference might see fit to set up machinery for assembling similar conferences at regular intervals or whenever circumstance appeared to make this desirable, and thus establish the Central American Conference as a recurring institution”.<sup>75</sup>

After about a month of negotiations—enlivened by some more dinners, concerts, and receptions that “added to the spirit of good fellowship”—the conference ended. The new “Treaty of Fraternity”, as the decisions of the conference were officially known, established that the Treaty of 1923 would remain in effect between Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua and added new articles on the arbitration of international conflicts and extradition. Reflecting on the outcome of the conference, Hanna somewhat

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<sup>72</sup> Lane to the Secretary of State, January 26, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties; Edward Lawton (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to Guatemala) to the Department of State, January 27, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew Hanna (U.S. Minister to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 89, March 16, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties.

<sup>74</sup> Hull to the U.S. Legations in Central America, January 31, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties.

<sup>75</sup> Hanna to the Secretary of State, Despatch 94, March 17, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties. In lieu of Department instructions on this subject, Hanna did add that “the idea was a purely personal one”.

ironically noted that the fact that it had taken place without American guidance was a major step ahead: “[The delegates] manifestly feel that this conference marks the beginning of a new order of things in the political relations of the Central American states, and that they have established a foundation for greater stability in Central America on which future conferences may be build.”<sup>76</sup>

While Hanna cautioned that the Conference did not “necessarily” mark “the beginning of a millennium for Central America”, his reports on this event do indicate that he and his colleagues continued to labor under the assumption that international treaties combined with behind-the-scenes direction from the U.S. legations would determine the future of Central America. Ubico, Carías, and Somoza, meanwhile, recognized what the real “new order of things” would be. As Kenneth Grieb concludes in his classic account on Martínez’ rise to power:

...the successful defiance of the United States by Martínez ushered in a new era in Central American politics, making possible the rise of a new series of dictators. So long as the United States remained unwilling to resort to force, any strong-willed leader could seize office and retain it. Nearly all incumbent isthmian regimes immediately took advantage of the opportunity to perpetuate themselves in power.<sup>77</sup>

While Washington had some hope that it could keep the caudillos tied down by the 1923 Treaty, the latter recognized that, when stripped of American determination to back it up, the Treaty was just a scrap of paper. While the development towards a noninterference policy was completed in Washington, Ubico and Carías were building their armies, closing down newspapers, exiling opponents, and packing the National Legislations with supporters. They were ready to extend their terms in power.

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<sup>76</sup> Hanna to the Secretary of State, Despatch 134, April 14, 1934, PR El Salvador, Vol. 128, cl. 710 Political Relations. Treaties.

<sup>77</sup> Grieb, “The United States and the rise of General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3:2 (November 1971) 151-172, there 172.