



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Berk, J.H.H. van den

### **Citation**

Berk, J. H. H. van den. (2012, June 7). *The middle men : the American Foreign Service and the dictators of Central America, 1930-1952*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19048>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19048>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/19048> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

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

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

**Issue Date:** 2012-06-07

## Chapter 5

# WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

## The Good Neighbor and Fascism, 1936-1939

Meanwhile, the trend towards Fascism is increasingly pronounced throughout most of Latin America. Fascist trappings naturally appeal to the “strong men” dictators (...) [T]he four reigning Central American dictators (...) started flirtations with the Euro-Asiatic dictatorial countries; El Salvador was the first nation in the world outside Japan to recognize Manchukuo and Jorge Ubico of Guatemala – who has frequently described President Roosevelt as “a dangerous communist” – once planned an alliance with Italy, but was restrained by his aides.

~ Wilbur Burton, *The Spectator*, 1938 <sup>1</sup>

When Corrigan wrote that “dictatorships with their tyrannies, imprisonments, political exiles and political executions are abhorrent to the spirit of America”<sup>2</sup>, he was not voicing an old cliché. Rather, he expressed a concern that would not—and perhaps could not—have presented itself with the same urgency only a couple of years earlier. Although American foreign policy and politics would take many twists and turns before the United States got involved in the War, events around the world during the late 1930s presented the clear and immediate possibility of a future conflict with the European dictatorships.

As historian Benjamin Alpers argues, the contemporary, 21<sup>st</sup> century American notion of dictatorship as the opposite of democracy is comparatively new:

There is nothing necessary about the peculiar and central role that dictatorship has played in the political life of this country (...) [F]or most of the history of Western political thought, dictatorship and democracy were regarded as only two of many possible forms of political organization—among them, tyranny, aristocracy, and monarchy. Although dictatorship and democracy were certainly distinct from one another, they were not complete opposites.<sup>3</sup>

The identification of a democracy/dictatorship dichotomy and its association with a more fundamental good/evil divide is the result of a historical development, not a timeless truth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilbur Burton, “Fascism and the Monroe Doctrine”, *The Spectator*, 160-2719 (February 4, 1938) 178.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 4, page 153.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, democracy, and American popular culture. Envisioning the totalitarian enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Chapel Hill and London 2003) 1-2.

Indeed, during the 1920s, American intellectuals held a fairly benign view of strong men and dictators in “backward” countries. After the stock market crash of 1929, as capitalist democracies around the world struggled to survive economically and even politically, the idea that dynamic dictatorships, such as that in Mussolini’s Italy, were the way of the future gained even more ground. From its high watermark of around 1930, however, the regard for dictatorship in the United States took an ever accelerating plunge. The catalysis of this development was the increasingly blatant aggression shown by the European dictatorships, primarily Italy and Germany and, to an extent, Soviet Russia. Another development in the history of the idea of dictatorship was that a new category of dictatorship was proposed in Italy: This was the notion of the “Totalitarian State” which, briefly summarized, was a particularly dynamic, aggressive, “modern” form of dictatorship which sought “total” domination over its subjects. Americans eventually applied the term not just to Italian Fascism, but also to German Nazism and even to Soviet Communism. From roughly 1935 to 1939, the American image of Totalitarianism was shaped by the persecutions, show trials, and international aggression of the European dictatorships.<sup>4</sup>

It so happened that the Central American *continuismo* campaigns of the second half of the 1930s coincided with these ominous international events. While Ubico, Carías, and Martínez were securing their continued rule, Italy occupied Ethiopia, Germany remilitarized the Rhineland, and Japan invaded China. The concurrence of these events, combined with the apparent sympathy of the isthmian regimes for Italian and Spanish Fascism, raised the question of whether the Central American governments were somehow part of a global trend in favor of totalitarian dictatorships.

This question was decided in favor of the caudillos, who were eventually adopted into the United Nations alliance. American historians have generally praised the Good Neighbor policy for enabling a close working relationship between the United States and Latin America during the Second World War. The situation during the First World War had been quite the opposite. Moreover, U.S.-Latin American relations had grown colder after that war as intervention became a contentious issue. The initiatives of the Roosevelt administration are said to have turned that state of affairs around.

## 1 THE GOOD NEIGHBOR AND FASCISM

In December 1941, nine Central American and Caribbean nations followed the example of the United States by declaring war on the Axis. They were only the forerunners, because, eventually, all Latin American countries joined the war on the side of their northern neighbor. This was a remarkable development considering the fact that all the major nations in Latin America (except Brazil) remained neutral during World War I. Moreover, Latin Americans long considered the United States—the so-called “Colossus of the North”—a threat to their own independence. Naturally, the Roosevelt

---

<sup>4</sup> Edward A. Purcell, *The crisis of democratic theory. Scientific naturalism and the problem of value* (Lexington 1973); Alpers, *Dictators*; David F. Schmitz, *United States foreign policy toward Fascist Italy, 1920-1940* (PhD Thesis: New Brunswick 1985).

administration considered the wartime alliance with Latin America to be the crowning achievement of its Good Neighbor policy, which allayed Latin fears about American intentions and cleared the way for cooperation. As Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle noted after the outbreak of the war: “The heartening thing (...) is the swift and virtually anonymous support from all of the republics of this hemisphere. If ever a policy paid dividends, the Good Neighbor Policy has. So far, they are sticking with us with scarcely a break”.<sup>5</sup>

Many historians agree with Berle’s assessment that the Good Neighbor laid the groundwork for the wartime cooperation.<sup>6</sup> In his classic study on the Good Neighbor policy, Bryce Wood argued: “Just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, then, it may be said that the United States had established, with the assistance of certain Latin American states, an unprecedented set of relationships productive of a nearly solidary American attitude toward threats from without”.<sup>7</sup> The Roosevelt administration’s strict adherence to nonintervention; rhetorical commitment to the ideal of pan-American solidarity and equality; and encouragement of reciprocal trade agreements significantly improved South American perceptions of the United States. By the end of the decade “the northern colossus no longer looked quite so much like Latin America’s natural enemy”.<sup>8</sup>

During the first term of the Roosevelt administration—while the Depression was still the number one concern and free-trade enthusiast Cordell Hull was in charge of foreign policy—Washington put its improved relation with Latin America to good use by stimulating a hemisphere-wide reciprocal trade program. During the second term however, the attention of the administration turned to the threat emanating from European fascism. Roosevelt himself got more and more involved in the execution of foreign policy and, in the Western Hemisphere, this meant that interest in trade agreements dwindled and the greatest stress was put on a policy of building inter-American solidarity against foreign threats.<sup>9</sup>

Too often ignored, however, is the fact that the Latinos were not passive receivers of Good Neighborliness. Martínez in particular was an adept student of the policy and appropriated it for his own purposes. While the general prepared for his own *continuismo* campaign toward the end of the decade, his regime further dramatized the neighborly relations between Washington and San Salvador for local and international audiences. Ubico, Carías, and Martínez successfully won the hearts and minds of American diplomats with a determined campaign that associated their governments with American goals and objectives, despite the ideological divides.

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on this theme, see Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 91-108; Gellman, *Good Neighbor diplomacy*, 121-126 and Michael J. Kryzaneck, *U.S.-Latin American Relations* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition: Westport, CT, and London 1996) 59-62.

<sup>7</sup> Wood, *The Making*, 334.

<sup>8</sup> Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard, *Latin America*, 1-8; Howard Jablon, *Crossroads of Decision. The State Department and Foreign Policy, 1933-1937* (Lexington, KY, 1983) particularly chapter 1 and 5.

The fact that the U.S.-Central American connection was a two-way street has been remarked upon in several excellent studies. Frederick Weaver, for example, notes that while “it is still true that many acting in the name of the United States have been complicit in what have frequently had very unpleasant consequences”, he is also “impressed by some Central Americans’ ability to manipulate U.S. fears and acquisitiveness for their own ends”.<sup>10</sup> The ability of local actors to appropriate the goals or terms of U.S. policy is also the topic of some research. Thomas Leonard, a specialist in U.S.-Central American affairs, recounts how the leaders of Central America represented the signing of Hull’s trade pacts as a sign of U.S. support for their regimes. Discussing the Cold War era, Joseph and Spenser note that: “Not infrequently, Latin American states used a Cold War rationale, generated outside the region, to wage war against their citizens, to gain or perpetuate power, and to create or justify authoritarian military regimes”.<sup>11</sup>

When studying the legations’ archives, it is not always easy to ascertain who manipulated who. Perhaps it is even somewhat misleading to put the matter in such terms, because it implies a degree of planning and purposefulness that may not have existed in fact. Concerning the subject of the next twenty pages, which involve many people accusing many other people of being closet fascists, there was doubtlessly as much frantic mudslinging as there was determined deception. However, the years before the outbreak of the Second World War represent an excellent case study to investigate how comparatively new terms like fascist and Good Neighbor were defined and redefined both by Americans and Central Americans.

## 2. THE SPECTER OF FASCISM

The rise of Fascism was a point of major debate in Central America throughout the late 1930s. But what this new term and the dangers that it implied meant in the local context remained a contested issue for some years. Initially, local opposition groups appropriated the term to label their enemies: the Central American dictators. American observers, most notably the United States press, but also the local legations and the State Department, initially shared the opposition’s concern for the supposedly Fascist tendencies in Central American politics. By the end of the decade, however, the caudillos successfully turned the tables on their opponents: By the start of the Second World War, the Central American governments were identified in Washington as the first line of defense against Fascist intrusions in the hemisphere.

### 2.1 The opposition

From the early 1930s onward, actual repression—or fear thereof—in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras produced a steady stream of refugees. This was not a homogenous group, either politically or socially. It included aristocrats and high army

---

<sup>10</sup> Weaver, *Inside the Volcano*.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard, *Central America*, xii-xv and 104-108; Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Spenser eds., *In from the cold. Latin America’s new encounters with the Cold War* (Durham and London 2008) 5.

officers who were members of opposition parties; conscientious objectors to the *continuismo* campaigns who had been high- or midlevel employees of government or public institutions; and simple *campesinos* who had fled the violence of the 1932 *Matanza*. Members of the first group formed stable exile communities in Panama, San José, Mexico, New Orleans, and New York City by the late 1930s. It was said that in Mexico, dozens of seats in local *cantinas* were occupied by as many disgruntled *políticos* and generals from Central America.<sup>12</sup>

Those who reached the safety of the more liberal states surrounding Central America were the lucky ones: oppositionists who fell into the hands of one of the dictators were submitted to their mercy. Whether mercy was granted or not depended on circumstances. If Ubico had a score to settle with Martínez, he might help the latter's opponents. If not, he was liable to solicit his neighbor's good-will by punishing his enemies. A group of Salvadoran peasants that reached Honduras in 1932, for example, was relocated to distant regions by the Carías regime and never heard from again: "[I]t is not known whether they have survived", reported the legation almost ten years later.<sup>13</sup> In August 1937, the Honduran rebel leader Umaña was captured in Guatemala and shot "while attempting to escape".<sup>14</sup>

In Mexico and Costa Rica, however, political exiles were fairly safe and generally free from government censorship. It was primarily from the capitals of these countries that a continuous barrage of propaganda against the caudillos was emitted throughout the 1930s. Interestingly, such propaganda was not only directed at compatriots, but also at the U.S. legations, the State Department, or to Franklin Roosevelt personally. Despite Washington's stress on non-intervention over the past years, the idea of the United States as a crusader for democracy was still alive.

During the early 1930s, opposition letters addressed to the Americans focused on constitutions and treaties and, of course, on how these were trampled by the Ubico, Martínez, and Carías regimes. Considering that the writers of these letters had years of experience with the pro-constitutionalist interventions of the Republican administrations, it is not surprising that oppositionists expected this theme to strike a chord with the *yanquis*. For example, Angel Zúñiga Huete, who voluntarily left Honduras after Carías' election victory, had lived through several episodes of U.S. intervention in favor of the 1923 Treaty. During Carías' *continuismo* campaign, he spammed the State Department with lengthy and eloquent letters on the constitutional articles that were crushed in his homeland. His personal history with the Americans did not prepare him for the new age of nonintervention that was taking shape. For years, Zúñiga Huete wrote about treaties

---

<sup>12</sup> For example: Harold A. Collins (U.S. Chargé d'Affairs a.i. to Costa Rica) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1329, February 5, 1937, PR Honduras, Box 23, cl. 800: Costa Rica.

<sup>13</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1530, August 19, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 68, cl. 800.B: Relations between Communists and Nazis.

<sup>14</sup> Cramp to the Secretary of State, Despatch 764, August 9, 1937, PR Honduras, Box 23, cl. 800: Honduras.

and constitutions that had long been abandoned both in Washington and in Tegucigalpa.<sup>15</sup>

With the rise of Fascism in Europe however, the theme of democracy started to play an ever increasing role in American newspapers and in the speeches of American statesmen. In this pro-democratic and anti-Fascist rhetoric, the Central American opposition movements found a new parlance to translate their concerns about local matters to the Yankees.

The opposition's arguments did not undergo fundamental changes throughout the 1930s. Stated in neutral terms, it objected to the fact that no honest elections had been held since Ubico, Martínez, and Carías came to power; that these gentlemen changed the constitutions to remain in power; and that violent and non-violent means were employed by these regimes to keep opponents quiet. As such, the situation described in the writings of Central American oppositionists—while objectionable in itself—was not different in any meaningful way from the situation that had existed under earlier dictators and caudillos. Yet, by the late 1930s Central American oppositionists found a sympathetic audience for their writings by representing the authoritarian governments in their home countries as Fascist dictatorships.

The Honduran Liberal Party was particularly adept at appropriating the language of Democracy vs. Fascism to translate its concern about Carías' growing power to Washington. In one representative letter, Angel Zúñiga Huete claimed that "the Dictator Carías is in accord with the totalitarian doctrines of the Dictators Hitler and Mussolini, and (...) democracy in Honduras has been exterminated". The Liberal further claimed that President Roosevelt was "a true democrat, who is interested, according to his declarations and those of Mr. Hull, and Sumner Welles, in that which prevails in the Governments of America which sustain democratic doctrines and do not permit exotic doctrines such as Nazis, communists, etc."<sup>16</sup> Whatever declarations Zúñiga Huete referred to were likely to have been intended for European audiences. Central American opposition groups, however, were quick to point out that the ideals of democracy could only have universal application. As Venancio Callejas, a Honduran Nationalist who had broken with Carías during the *continuismo* campaign, argued in a personal letter to Roosevelt:

If the United States actually believes[,] as you have stated Mr. President, in Democracy, in Liberty[,] and in the blessings conferred by Peace (...) we feel absolutely certain that the Government of the United States will flatly refuse to extend recognition (...) to the Dictatorship which General Carías pretends to establish by force on Honduras, against the express wish of the People of Honduras, and clearly violating our National Institutions[. T]here is absolutely

---

<sup>15</sup> Argueta, *Carías*, 295-299

<sup>16</sup> El Comité Central del Partido Liberal Hondureño to Erwin, July 4, 1938 enclosed in: Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 362, July 12, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 35, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

no means of reconciling your noble[,] straightforward Declarations, with an Act of Recognition of that anti-democratic, illegal regime...<sup>17</sup>

The high-sounding words of men like Zúñiga-Huete and Callejas—who did not exactly have clean consciences themselves—did not go unnoticed. Historian Kenneth Grieb argued that the idea of a Fascist threat to Central America was “a masterstroke of propaganda”, for it was quickly picked up by the American press.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 *The American press*

Grieb identified a “myth” of a “Central American dictator’s league” in the American press during the 1930s. Newspapers and magazines of an impeccable reputation reported throughout 1937 and 1938 that the dictatorial regimes of Ubico, Martínez, Carías, and Somoza were in a secret alliance to keep each other in power and to suppress democratically-inclined opposition. There was no direct proof for the existence of such an alliance and the notion that it did exist was based entirely on circumstantial evidence: rumors spread by political exiles; isolated instances of actual cooperation between the isthmian republics; and the caudillos’ seemingly ominous international acts, such as Guatemala’s and Salvador’s early recognition of Franco’s regime and their subsequent retirement from the League of Nations.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Grieb wrote, a Central American dictator’s league never existed. It might have appeared that the regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua were ideologically related, but in reality they did not abandon old rivalries and jealousies. Ubico, for example, was determined to dominate his neighbors, but was actively opposed by Martínez, while Somoza also made occasional claims to the leadership of the old Central American Unionist movement. Honduras was caught in the middle of the expansionist ambitions of its neighbors and made frantic attempts to remain on good terms with both of its strong northern neighbors. At the same time however, it was also engaged in a border conflict with Nicaragua, which, despite U.S. attempts at mediation, dragged on for decades. Under such circumstances, cooperation between the dictators was never realized.<sup>20</sup>

Simultaneously, it was reported in *The New York Times*, that the four Central American dictators had “joined in a protective alliance against political enemies”. The recent continuismo campaigns figured prominently in the *New York Times*’ description of the local dictatorships, asserting that:

matters are moving for the first time in history toward continuing dictatorships of the Fascist type in this section of Central America, where two Presidents [i.e. Ubico and Carías] already are serving their second terms in office, contrary to their Constitutions, and a third [i.e. Martínez] is considering the

---

<sup>17</sup> Venancio Callejas to Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 30, 1936 enclosed in Callejas to Keena, December 11, 1936, PR Honduras, Box 8, Vol. IX, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth J. Grieb, “The Myth of a Central American Dictator’s League”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 10:2 (November 1978) 329-345.

<sup>19</sup> *idem*, 329 & 330.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*.

same action. This is unprecedented in this part of the world, where United States influence has been great.

The last sentence is especially significant. It gives witness to the assumption that the United States would not allow the existence of dictatorships in its “backyard” if that could be prevented. And since it was unthinkable that locals could successfully stand up to the United States, it was assumed that a more powerful, sinister force was behind this development. Therefore, a link with Fascism was imagined, even though the evidence for such a link was tenuous. When Martínez managed to succeed himself in 1939, *The New York Times* reported that the general had used “methods typical of Hitler and Mussolini” and that “[e]xpert assistance was given to his supporters by Fascists and Nazis”. When Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the “anti-Communist” Rome Pact, the *Times* reported that the news was received “with glee” in Central America. Even if the dictators there did not join the Pact, it was obvious that their own League closely mirrored that of the Axis nations and there was “little need” to “take chances with [the] big good neighbor to the north” by formalizing those ties.<sup>21</sup>

That the American press saw a Fascist dictator’s league where there was none, is partly explained, Grieb wrote, by the fact that:

[t]he prevalence of the charges [against Central American dictators] was coincidental with alarm in the North American press about the spread of Fascism. The resulting sensitivity caused Yankees to perceive ‘Fascist influence’ throughout the world, much as in a subsequent era they would do the same with Communism. This mentality rendered the North American press susceptible to tales of a Central American Dictator’s League, which was presumed to be the extension of some vast plot hatched in Germany or Italy, since dictatorship was equated with Fascism in the Yankee mind.

Claiming that “dictatorship was equated with Fascism in the Yankee mind” was stretching the point. Mussolini, for example, was a respected foreign head-of-state in the United States during the 1920s. However, throughout the years 1936 to 1937 at least, the relationship between Central America dictatorship and Fascism was hotly debated at the American legations.

### 2.3 The Legations

Ubico was initially regarded as the legitimate and rightful president of Guatemala and all his minor sins were disregarded in the light of his honest and progressive administration. But from 1936 onward, American diplomats at the legation began to report the anti-liberal aspects of Ubico’s reign. Increasingly, words like “regimented”, “dictatorial”, and even “totalitarian” were used to typify his administration. These were not value-neutral terms. While a “strong”, “firm”, or even “heavy-handed” government was deemed a

---

<sup>21</sup> “A Dictatorship Belt”, *NYT* (September 5, 1937) 98; “Dictators agree in Latin America”, *NYT* (July 20, 1937) 18; “Salvador extends President’s term 6 years”, *NYT* (January 5, 1939) 1; “Pact stirs Central America”, *NYT* (November 14, 1937) 68. The articles of July 20 and November 14 are also mentioned in Grieb, “Myth”. Reiner Pommerin, *Das Dritte Reich und Lateinamerika. Die Deutsche Politik gegenüber Süd- und Mittelamerika, 1939-1942* (Düsseldorf) 27-33 shows that Germany had little interest to expand the anti-Comintern Pact to Latin America. Neither were Latin American States much interested to join the alliance.

stabilizing factor in a country that was considered to be plagued by “graft-hungry men” and “political passions”, a totalitarian dictatorship was something else altogether.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier in the decade, Ubico was on very good personal terms with minister Whitehouse, but after 1934, the caudillo became increasingly secretive and withdrawn. The American legation noted on several occasions that Ubico was not the congenial man he was during the first years of his reign and that it had become very difficult to establish any kind of contact with him. A 1937 memorandum established that:

[u]pon his entry into office, he [Ubico] was more friendly and congenial than he is at the present time. This attitude is believed to be due to a loss of confidence in many of the persons who surround him. He is extremely high tempered and very reluctant to take or allow advice. This is considered his one weak point.<sup>23</sup>

Such behavior, one can speculate, probably developed during the years 1934-1937, as the general schemed to continue himself in power.

It is likely that Ubico's aloofness contributed to the legation's suspicions about his alleged ties with European Fascism. At the very least, the distance that Ubico put between himself and the legation prevented the Americans from hearing his version of many developments. Concurrently, the new minister to Guatemala, Fay Allen Des Portes, had to rely on the outward appearances of Ubico's government. Throughout the year 1937 he became very concerned about Ubico's dictatorial measures. In January of that year, the minister noted that Ubico “is apparently reactionary to the point where he favors strongly the dictatorial methods of Fascism”. He continued that Ubico “has little use for pure democracy in Guatemala and he is probably inclined to view with a certain measure of suspicion the acts or policies of any Governments of liberal tendencies”.<sup>24</sup>

While Ubico seemed to distance himself from the American legation, he exchanged tokens of affectation with Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler: Guatemala was one of the first governments to recognize the rebel “government” of General Franco and when Germany left the League of Nations in October 1936, Guatemala followed suit some weeks later.<sup>25</sup> In June 1937, Des Portes reported that Ubico had received a decoration from the King of Italy. “The matter is of significance”, the minister wrote, “as an indication of the orientation which has recently been noted in the policies and prejudices of President Ubico.” The president, the report continued, was:

[s]trongly attracted by and a great admirer of certain of the dictatorial Governments in Europe, and his own administration reflects the policies and

<sup>22</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 267, June 9, 1937, (M1280, Roll 4) Jorge Ubico: 652-658; DesPortes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 371, August 30, 1937, M1289, Roll 2) Political Affairs 1308; Des Portes to Welles, July 17, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 9, Separate file, marked “Des Portes”; Des Portes to Welles, August 6, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 9, Separate file, marked “Des Portes”.

<sup>23</sup> Unknwon author to Des Portes, Memorandum on present conditions in Guatemala, April 24, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 1, cl. 800: Guatemala.

<sup>24</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 174, February 2, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 1, cl. 800: Guatemala .

<sup>25</sup> Welles to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, March 7, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

characteristics of such Governments. His prompt recognition of the Franco Government in Spain, his growing friendliness with Germany and Italy, and his correspondingly intense antagonism to liberalism in any form are straws which indicate the direction of the wind.<sup>26</sup>

As Franco set up his Fascist government in Spain, Carías destroyed the constitution of Honduras. It proved tempting for minister Keena to connect the two events and to compare the factional squabbles of Honduras with the dramatic divide between Right and Left in Europe: “The conflict between the Fascists and Communist ideas of government has its repercussions in Central America”, Keena reported, “and translated to this area finds a lineup with Mexico definitely to the left and Costa Rica partially; Guatemala and El Salvador distinctly to the right and Honduras and Nicaragua now to the right but both facing possible conflicts”. According to the minister, this division was also visible within Honduras itself. Since the Liberals were not able to connect their opposition to Carías with a greater cause that could attract a broader following, they may now be experimenting with Leftist ideologies:

The Government of President Carías is strongly anti-Communist. In reflection of the alignment of forces in Spain this naturally throws the Liberal Party, which is seeking a cause to espouse in addition to its claim for the continuance of the Constitution of 1924, which, so far, has not awakened any fighting sentiment in the country, into the Communist fold since they must be diametrically opposed to the Government and also as partisanship of that idea appears to present the only opportunity they might have for obtaining the money and assistance [from foreign sources] which would be needed to overthrow the Government.

“[T]he next conflict for power in Honduras”, Keena concluded, “may be on the lines now being so clearly marked out in Europe”.<sup>27</sup>

Keena’s predictions were not immediately adopted by his successor, John D. Erwin. In fact, the first couple of months of Erwin’s service in Honduras were uneventful, if, at times, frustrating. The legation dutifully followed central policy as it tried to establish a working relation with the Carías government on inter-American neutrality and as it attempted to bring Honduras and Nicaragua closer together on a long-pending boundary dispute which endangered inter-American solidarity. Both were arduous tasks as the tiny Honduran Foreign Ministry was slow to answer legation queries and the government as a whole did not budge from its intransigent stance on the boundary dispute. Frustration at the American legation slowly built up. The inability or unwillingness of the Carías administration to work with the legation on important inter-American projects were interpreted as indicators of its provincialism, backwardness, and lack of concern for anything but the survival of the regime. When combined with the latent concern over Carías’ dictatorial methods during the *continuismo* campaign, these apprehensions

---

<sup>26</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 267, June 9, 1937, (M1280, Roll 4) Jorge Ubico: 652-658.

<sup>27</sup> Keena to the Secretary of State, Despatch 557, November 13, 1936, Box 8, cl. 800: Honduras.

caused the legation to define the Honduran government as an archaic 19<sup>th</sup> century caudillo regime.

In August 1938, first secretary William Cramp wrote a damning report on the Carias administration for its uncompromising position in the Honduran-Nicaraguan boundary. The administration, according to Cramp, had “fallen into such provincialism and corruption as might have been expected at the beginning of the century, but even for Central America is now somewhat unusual”.<sup>28</sup> The government’s backtracking caused the secretary many headaches:

The Legation has had the greatest difficulty in obtaining action on even informal routine matters. Replies to oral or written requests are not received for from one to three months, and sometimes never, in spite of repeated reminders. Favorable action, as promised in satisfactory replies, is seldom actually carried out.<sup>29</sup>

The legation was obviously considerably embarrassed by this situation, since it interfered with its own efficiency. This situation significantly influenced its evaluation of the regime: “[This] is not a Government of the people, but a small group of incapable, dishonest and extremely provincial politicians controlling the primitive capital of a small, backward Central American Republic”.<sup>30</sup> Although Cramp aimed most of his antagonism at Carias’ ministers, who “have no interest in the fate of Honduras and are swayed purely by hope of personal gain and glory”, the president himself was not free of blame:

[He] has the typical Indian characteristics of equivocation whenever possible. He dislikes decisions, but, when his hand is forced, his judgment is based entirely upon political expediency. He appears to me to feel that his incumbency of the presidency is far from secure and that he can only stay in office by holding the reins of Government with an iron hand and keeping the entire Executive Power therein. He apparently trusts no one, not even his own Cabinet, and the ever-growing discontent throughout the country with his regime has brought to him the realization that he can continue in office only by strong dictatorial methods and never through popular demand.<sup>31</sup>

Up to about November 1939, Erwin reported with some regularity on the government’s laxness, corruption, provincialism, and dictatorial practices.<sup>32</sup> So when

---

<sup>28</sup> Cramp to the Secretary of State, Despatch 405, August 17, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>30</sup> Cramp to the Secretary of State, Despatch 410, September 2, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras.

<sup>31</sup> Cramp to the Secretary of State, Despatch 405, August 17, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras. The Department initially responded positively to this analysis by Cramp, noting that it would be “of assistance to the Department in evaluating the future political developments in Honduras”. Adolf A. Berle (Acting Secretary of State) to Cramp, Despatch 103, September 17, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras.

<sup>32</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 504, November 12, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 505, November 15, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 504, December 14, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 881, December 2, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1939/I, cl. 500: Economic Conferences; Unknown author, Memorandum of Conversation with

Carías' supporters, toward the end of 1938, announced that the president's tenure would be extended for a second time, they could not count on Erwin's sympathy. The government itself, confident of its powerful position, handled the issue with a matter-of-fact attitude and pushed a bill through congress within less than a month which allowed Carías to rule until 1944. This still was not fast enough, however, to avoid the moral indignation of the American minister. Drawing implicit comparisons with the European dictatorships, Erwin reported to the Department that public support for Carías' continuismo could only be explained by the secret police's silencing of the opposition and by prevalence of official propaganda which whipped up the sentiments of the uninformed masses: "Backward and unprogressive as it may be, Honduras certainly has not failed to take advantage of modern inventions and propaganda tricks in whipping up sentiment among the masses for CONTINUISMO".<sup>33</sup>

For many observers outside of El Salvador, there seemed little doubt that Martínez favored Fascism. The Salvadoran chief was often mentioned in one breath with his presumably Fascist-minded neighbors. In 1937, for example, Des Portes noted that "There appears a growing sentiment that president Ubico of Guatemala, Carías of Honduras, and Martínez of El Salvador, are leaning more and more toward the Mussolini and Hitler form of dictatorship, a sentiment which would seem to be founded on undeniable proof".<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Laurence Duggan of the Department noted that "the Governments of Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras are Fascist in character and sympathy, if not in name".<sup>35</sup> Such assertions were based on, or at least confirmed by, the American press, Salvadoran opposition groups, and actions by the Salvadoran government—particularly its early recognition of Franco's rebel government.<sup>36</sup>

In 1938, the year that Martínez followed in his neighbor's footsteps by starting a campaign for his continuance in office, rumors about the general's Fascist sympathies were particularly widespread. The British chargé in Guatemala wrote Des Portes that the Salvadoran continuismo campaign provided "further evidence that Martínez has turned

---

Don Fernando Lardizibal at the American Legation, November 24, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1939/I, cl. 500: Economic Conferences; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 685, May 20, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/II, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, dispatch 698, June 2, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/II, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 885, December 7, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/II, cl. 800: Honduras. Continuismo.

<sup>33</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 905, December 18, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/II, cl. 800: Honduras. Continuismo.

<sup>34</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 371, August 30, 1937, M1289, Roll 2) Political Affairs 1308.

<sup>35</sup> Duggan to Welles, March 9, 1937, Lot Files, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, its predecessors, and its successors (henceforth ARA), Entry 211: Memorandums Relating to General Latin American Affairs January 4, 1937 to December 31, 1947 (henceforth Entry 211), Box 2, Folder marked January to June 1937.

<sup>36</sup> "Salvadorean" to Walter W. Hoffman (U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to El Salvador), September 17, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 13, Vol. VI, cl. 800: Political Affairs; and Rafael Menendez et al. to Frazer, January 6, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 21, Vol. VII, cl. 800: Political Affairs III.

Fascist in the letter and the spirit”, a view that the American minister seemed to have subscribed to.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. military attachés to Central America had been worried for some time about Salvador’s use of Italian military airplanes and in 1939 captain Lamson-Scribner noted that, besides being morally questionable, Martínez’ *continuismo* probably enjoyed active support from local Nazis.<sup>38</sup>

The American legation in Salvador was surprisingly philosophical about Martínez’ supposedly Fascist inclinations, although there were a few acute “black scares” at the legation throughout the years. In August 1938, for example, the Americans were anxious about the inclusion of an Italian national in Martínez’ retinue during a campaign trip. It was soon determined, however, that the Italian in question had imposed himself on some officials in Martínez’ following and had no personal connections to the president.<sup>39</sup> The matter was soon forgotten and, overall, Martínez continued to enjoy the legation’s sympathy. After the general was reelected to office in 1939, minister Frazer’s only comment was that the president’s political philosophy was akin to that of “certain” European leaders. Until about 1941, this was as close as Frazer got to accusing Martínez of Fascist sympathies.<sup>40</sup> Why this was so will be discussed in the following section.

While the Department itself was not particularly interested in Central American affairs during the late 1930s, reports about Fascist influences in the highest echelons of foreign governments did cause some anxiety. The example of the Spanish Civil War in particular, raised concerns that a similar ideological conflict might erupt between the Central American dictators and their leftist neighbor to the north: Mexico. In March, 1937, Laurence Duggan, a close collaborator of Assistant Secretary Welles, complained that Ubico had a “Communist fear psychosis” which made the latter unreasonably fearful of supposedly “Communist” influences from Mexico. The matter was serious because inter-American solidarity under U.S. leadership was high on the list of foreign policy objectives. American attempts to temper Central American fears about Mexico, however, had come to naught. The Mexicans, Duggan wrote, were probably blissfully unaware of the fact

---

<sup>37</sup> H.H.S. Birch (British Minister to Guatemala) to Des Portes, August 18, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: El Salvador; Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 671, August 19, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: El Salvador.

<sup>38</sup> Lt. Col. J.B. Pate (U.S. Military Attaché to Guatemala) to the Secretary of War, Report 4,215, March 7, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 14, Vol. VII, cl. 820.02; Pate to the Secretary of War, Report 4,228, March 11, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 14, Vol. VII, cl. 820.02; Pate to the Secretary of War, Report 4,280, March 11, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 14, Vol. VII, cl. 820.02; Capt. F.M. Lamson-Scribner (U.S. Naval Attaché to Guatemala) to Frazer, January 13, 1938, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 1; Lamson-Scribner to Frazer, January 20, 1938, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 1.

<sup>39</sup> Hoffman to the Secretary of State, Despatch 286, August 24, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 13, Vol. VI, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

<sup>40</sup> Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 478, February 24, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 21, Vol. VII, cl. 800: Political Affairs III. However, also note: Hoffman to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1118, October 15, 1937, PR El Salvador, Box 9, Vol. V, cl. 700 Relations of State. General and Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 62, February 9, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 13, Vol. VI, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

that its publications were considered revolutionary propaganda in Central America and “[i]n connection with such consideration as may be given this question, it should not be forgotten that the Governments of Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras are Fascist in character and sympathy, if not in name, and that the Governments of the first three named States have already recognized the ‘Government’ of general Franco”.<sup>41</sup>

#### 2.4 The Dictators

Were the Central American dictators closet Fascists? Taken as a whole, the literature on Central American history provides no conclusive evidence, *pro* or *contra*, for the alleged Fascist sympathies of Ubico, Martínez, or Carías. Although there are studies that describe the influence of Nazis and Fascists in Latin America during the War<sup>42</sup>, there are no in-depth studies that show how the European ideologies were perceived or received by Central American leaders themselves.

There were certainly outward *parallels* between the European Fascist regimes and the Central American dictatorships. Most obviously, both were authoritarian, state-centered, and single party political systems that employed the secret service and the army to enforce their rule. On the economic level, the Fascist and the caudillo governments both had a conception of modernization that focused on state-directed development through corporations. The object of modernization under both systems was understood to be a strengthening of the state, not a reform of the social structure. Both the Fascist and the Central American idea of social stratification were based on a hierarchy of race. And even though the Central American idea of race was more traditional and less Spenserian than that of the Fascists, anti-Semitism was rather pronounced in Central America.

Also, the foreign policies of the caudillos at times appeared to favor the Fascist nations. Germany was an important market for Central American coffee and many Central American nations accepted the Aski mark system of bartering, giving the Germans an even bigger stake in the Central American economies—sometimes at the expense of the United States. Italian efforts to revive its armament industry by vigorously pushing its weapons on the international arms markets were modestly successful in Central America, where the Salvadoran government bought several airplanes and pieces of artillery at discount prices. Meanwhile, Franco’s ideology of ‘hispanidad’ and his ‘Falange’ party naturally appealed to the culturally Hispanic elites of Central America. Besides a traditional interest for the politics of the “mother country”, Central American elites sympathized with Franco’s fight against the Communist specter. Concurrently,

---

<sup>41</sup> Duggan to Welles, March 9, 1937, Lot Files, Entry 211, Box 2, Folder marked January to June 1937 .

<sup>42</sup> Pommerin, *Das Dritte Reich*; Pommerin, “Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland und Lateinamerika, 1933-1945”, in: Karl Kohut et al. eds., *Deutsche in Lateinamerika – Lateinamerika in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main 1996) 398-406; Günter Kahle, “Deutsche Landsknechte, Legionäre und Militärinstruktoren in Lateinamerika”, in: Kohut, *Deutsche in Lateinamerika*, 35-47; Bratzel and Leonard, *Latin America during World War II*; Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*.

Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras were among the first nations to extend diplomatic recognition to Franco's rebel government.

It should not be surprising, then, that some historians have described the isthmian dictators as active supporters of Fascism. Perhaps most recently, John Bratzel noted that Ubico and Martínez regarded Fascism as a positive alternative political system<sup>43</sup>, a claim supported in several earlier historical studies.<sup>44</sup> Elam, in a study on the Central American military, claimed that "in the period 1920-1965, military officers attracted to corporate, fascist, or military populist political models temporarily dominated governmental institutions" in several countries, including Guatemala and El Salvador.<sup>45</sup> In a historical study on El Salvador, James Dunkerley took the claim that Central American dictators sympathized with Fascism furthest by stating that Martínez was an "unashamed admirer of Hitler and Mussolini".<sup>46</sup>

While there are enough parallels between the Fascist and caudillo political system and enough outward signs of sympathy and limited cooperation between Central American and European Fascist governments, two important questions require further exploration: Firstly, if Central American leaders sympathized with or admired European leaders, did that mean that they were firm adherents of the Fascist ideology? Secondly, could the caudillos in any way be described as proxies of the European Fascist regimes or did their sympathy for certain European leaders translate to a viable security threat for the United States? The American press and the Central American opposition would have answered both of these questions with a solid "yes". Even the American diplomatic corps entertained some suspicions in this same direction. But do these suspicions reflect reality?

With regard to the first question, several historians have offered some important evaluations of the caudillos' apparent regard for Fascism. Thomas Leonard, one of the foremost experts on U.S.-Central American relations, argued that many of the supposedly Fascist tendencies of Ubico's regime "were peculiar to the nature of Guatemalan politics". With regard to El Salvador, Leonard stated that Americans overestimated the prestige of Fascism in that nation because they "did not consider [Martínez'] Fascist sympathies within the context of Salvadoran nationalism or as a response to previous U.S. interference in El Salvador's domestic affairs".<sup>47</sup> In other words, Central American statesmen admired those aspects of European Fascist governments that were already "peculiar" to their own style of government, such as a strong demand for order and material progress. This did not translate to a complete

---

<sup>43</sup> John F. Bratzel, "Introduction", in: Bratzel and Thomas Leonard eds., *Latin America during World War II* (Lanham, MD, 2007) 9.

<sup>44</sup> "Guatemala", in: John Booth, Christine J. Wade & Thomas Walker, *Understanding Central America* (4<sup>th</sup> edition: 2006) 115-116; Lindo-Fuentes et al., *Remembering*, 82-86; Parkman, *Non-violent insurrection*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Robert V. Elam, "El Salvador, 1840-1927", in: Brian Loveman and Thomas Davies eds., *The Politics of antipolitics: The military in Latin America* (Lincoln 1978) 52-57, there 57.

<sup>46</sup> Dunkerley, *The Long War*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard, *Central America*, 109-110.

understanding of, or adherence to the Fascist program of virulent racism, glorification of violence, brutal international competition, etc.

Kenneth J. Grieb and Thomas J. Dodd, the foremost American bibliographers of Jorge Ubico and Tiburcio Carías, respectively, offered an even more nuanced picture of the political ideas of these statesmen. Dodd argued that even though the political philosophers in Carías' party considered Mussolini's Italy as a model for establishing order, other "Fascist-like" aspects of the Honduran regime were actually based on regional sources which were more evidently relevant to the Honduran experience. Carías' ideas on order and progress, and the important function of the state in achieving these goals, were more akin to the ideas of Auguste Comte—whose philosophy played a significant role in the Central American Liberal tradition—than to the practice of Mussolini. Hostility toward democratic practice reflected Honduras' historical experience with the failure of limited democratic experiments during the Great Depression. *Personalista* rule was based on the regional examples of Plutarco Eías Calles in México, Jorge Ubico in Guatemala, and Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador, not on Hitler or Mussolini. Even Franklin Roosevelt and Ramsey McDonald were considered more appropriate models of strong executive power during a time of economic crisis than the European dictators. Lastly, the idea of a corporate state, which appeared so attractive to some of Carías' ideologues, was based on the Mexican revolutionary experience, not on the Fascist model.<sup>48</sup>

Grieb added to these observations an analysis of Guatemala's international perspective and its differences with that of the United States. While the North Americans focused on Hitler, arguably the harshest and most dangerous Fascist dictator from an American perspective, Guatemalans focused on Franco and Mussolini. Latin American culture was more intricately tied to that of Southern Europe, especially Spain, the "mother country". So it was primarily Franco, not Hitler, who was regarded as the model of Fascism in Guatemala. Ubico respected Franco's military background and leadership style and sympathized with his fight against Communism. This is what Fascism meant to the Guatemalan statesman. As a former cabinet minister of Ubico later told Grieb: "General Ubico did not recognize the Franco government because of any ideological sympathy, but simply because it was a military regime. General Ubico had a great appreciation for a military career". By contrast, Ubico considered Hitler a "peasant" who was far inferior to his colleagues in southern Europe.<sup>49</sup>

The files of the American legation in Guatemala also offer an interesting sidelight on Guatemalans' distaste for the German variant of Fascism. There were two groups of Germans in Guatemala: The older families of long residence who had become part of the coffee aristocracy and the lower class newcomers who had not achieved any kind of economic or social stature yet. The older Germans, many of whom had left the *Heimat* when it was still an empire, found the ideas of the Nazi Party distasteful and considered its very existence a symptom of the disease of the factionalized Weimar Republic.

---

<sup>48</sup> Dodd, *Carías*, 85-86 and 111-112.

<sup>49</sup> Grieb, *Guatemalan caudillo*, 248-249.

Members of the second group, however, were attracted to the Nazi Party, because it offered them a chance to increase their prestige and stature by climbing the Party's ranks. Correspondingly, it was the young German "upstarts" who managed the Nazi Party in Guatemala. The newfound confidence and self-importance of the young Nazis affronted the sensibilities of the Guatemalan aristocracy, both German and native. Guatemalan society ostracized a local Nazi leader, for example, because he had presumed to demonstrate his seniority over the German minister by having the distinguished old gentleman sit and wait in the anteroom of his office for two hours before seeing him.

Added to the arrogance of local Nazi "upstarts" was the racial component of Nazi teachings. It was well-known in Guatemala that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* had allotted an inferior place to the "Latin races". While this was enough reason for many Guatemalans to look down on the German variant of Fascism, the racism expressed by young Nazis in Guatemala was even harder to swallow. One local incident, which carried much more weight in Guatemala than any news that could have come from Europe, involved a German Party member who refused to offer his seat to a colored Guatemalan lady at a society *dansant*. The incident caused a scandal in local society and it was said that Ubico himself was considerably dismayed. According to the American legation, the president was "proud of his racial heritage" and profoundly shocked by the behavior of local Nazis.<sup>50</sup>

It appears then that such sympathies as Central American statesmen may have entertained for Fascism were rather superficial; they were based more on outward similarities between Southern European Fascism and *caudillismo*—authoritarianism and a strong demand for order and national progress—than on a shared body of concepts and ideas. Kenneth Grieb proposed that, for a time, Central American leaders attempted to stay on good terms with both the United States and with the new powers of Europe. On the one hand, the Central American states had considerable economic and cultural ties with Germany, Italy, and Spain. On the other, the United States' attitude toward the European dictators was for a time, in Grieb's words, "torn by indecision and immobilized by internal dissension regarding neutrality". As long as the power of Fascist states appeared to be on the rise and the United States remained tied to its isolationist policy, it was only natural for the isthmian republics to seek the friendship of the European states, leading to the many small signs of friendship described above.<sup>51</sup>

However, at the Pan-American conferences at Buenos Aires in 1936 and Lima in 1938, the United States took on an increasingly hostile posture toward the Fascists. Combined with increasingly belligerent speeches made by Roosevelt, it must have

---

<sup>50</sup> On the German colony in Guatemala in General, see: Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 21-38. Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 717, October 18, 1938, PR Guatemala, Box 18, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; Lamson-Scribner to Des Portes, December 8, 1938, PR Guatemala, Box 18, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; McKinney to the Secretary of State, Despatch 759, December 13, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

<sup>51</sup> Grieb, *Guatemalan caudillo*, 250-251.

become increasingly obvious to the Central American chiefs that they would not be able to continue friendly relations with *both* the United States and the Fascist powers.<sup>52</sup> And considering the overwhelming superiority of American power in the region, it was not long before the caudillos chose to play along with the *yanquis*.

### 3. BECOMING GOOD NEIGHBORS

From roughly 1938 onwards, the legations were exposed to pressure and incentives both from “above” and from “below” to redefine their relationship to the Central American dictatorships. The developing crisis in Europe moved the State Department to renew its interest in Central America. Significantly, its focus was not on Central American politics *per se*, but on the alleged activities of mainly German and Italian nationals there. The Central American presidents, meanwhile, battered the legations with signs of goodwill in an attempt to convince the *yanquis* that they were not Fascist stooges.

#### 3.1 *Winning hearts and minds in Guatemala*

Three factors contributed to Des Portes’ redefinition of Ubico as an opponent of Fascism and a staunch friend of the United States. The first was personal diplomacy; second came their joint fear, encouraged by the State Department, of “exotic” ideologies; and third were the intrigues of Ubico’s underlings.

It appears likely that Ubico took the first steps, toward the end of 1937, to regain the affection of the American legation. With the start of a new round of personal diplomacy the general probably wanted to break his increasingly isolated position. In September 1937, Ubico’s Chief of Protocol visited Des Portes to inform the minister of Ubico’s great admiration for the United States and his personal support for the latest U.S. initiative to loan destroyers to Brazil, which, in the words of the Chief of Protocol, formed a “bulwark of defense (...) against foreign aggression”. In the following weeks, the government-controlled press, probably with the “tacit approval” of Ubico, started to denounce the aggressive maneuverings of the dictatorships in Europe.<sup>53</sup> In November, the Nicaraguan envoy to Guatemala, who was said to be on good terms with Ubico, had a chat with Des Portes at the presidential palace and also informed the minister that Ubico had definitely changed his mind about Italy and Germany and that he had decided to support the United States instead.<sup>54</sup> Such signals gave Des Portes the impression that Ubico now planned to follow United States policy, if hostilities were to break out in Europe or Asia. “The legation has felt at various times in the past”, Des Portes reported:

“that President Ubico, because of his somewhat dictatorial administration, had strong leanings for and sympathy with the dictatorial Governments of Europe, even to the extent possibly of permitting his policies and administration to be colored by their ideology. Whether or not such

---

<sup>52</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>53</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 400, September 29, 1937, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 710: United States.

<sup>54</sup> Des Portes, Memorandum for the files, November 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 1, cl. 820.02: Foreign Activities.

observations were correct at the time, they would now appear to be refuted by the tenor of the comment published from day to day in the local papers”.<sup>55</sup>

Des Portes’ observations about Ubico’s change of heart were guarded at first, but the general prepared a diplomatic coup to win the minister over. On January 25, 1938, the legation reported that Ubico had just completed his customary annual inspection trip to the provinces. Somewhat at variance with the usual procedures, a second inspection trip was announced for February.<sup>56</sup> The official purpose of this trip was to hold public audiences and to open a new road in a very remote, isolated region mainly inhabited by Indian communities. It appears probable however that Ubico’s real or secondary motive was to showcase his popularity and mode of government to the Americans: In February, Des Portes was officially invited to join the general on his trip. If it was indeed Ubico’s plan to ingratiate himself to the Americans during an adventurous ride over the countryside, that plan worked splendidly.

Des Portes’ official report on the inspection tour<sup>57</sup> suggests that it was set up more like a short vacation than a business trip. All the officers of the American legation, including their wives and children, were invited for the excursion. They were treated to a visit of the *Lago de Atitlán*, a volcanic lake said to be one of the most beautiful in the world, and got to see the nearby Indian settlements where the inhabitants still adorned the colorful dress of their Maya ancestors—all sights that a modern tourist would want to take in. As was the usual practice, Ubico set up court in the villages he visited to receive local inhabitants and to listen to their troubles and concerns. In the case of complaints against local officials or disagreements among locals, the president would provide quick justice on the spot. If the issue at hand involved the local authorities, Ubico often decided on the matter in favor of the Indian petitioner. Needless to say, this practice made the president very popular among the rural populations, especially because previous governments had all but ignored them.<sup>58</sup>

The spectacle of the village audiences, combined with the ceremonies surrounding the opening of the local road, demonstrated Ubico’s fatherly concern for the Indians and opened Des Portes’ eyes to the reverential regard which many peasants showed for the president. He recounts how eager “the natives” were to “touch his [Ubico’s] clothing, kiss his hands or to receive from him a paternal touch on the head”. When the minister talked to the president about this, Ubico piously remarked that:

...he felt himself fortunate to have been able during the course of his administration to do much to liberate them [the Indians] from the economic

---

<sup>55</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 400, September 29, 1937, PR Guatemala, PR Guatemala, Box 11, cl. 710: United States.

<sup>56</sup> McKinney to the Secretary of State, Despatch 498, January 25, 1938, PR Guatemala, Box 17, cl. 800.1: President.

<sup>57</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 512, February 23, 1938, (M1280, Roll4), Jorge Ubico: 87.

<sup>58</sup> On Ubico’s relation with the Indian, consult: Richard N. Adams, “Ethnic images and strategies in 1944”, in: Carol A. Smith, *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988* (Austin 1990) 141-162, there 141-142; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 312-322.

exploitation and political oppression under which they had labored for many, many years.<sup>59</sup>

While the president's inspection trips and "social justice demagoguery" account for his genuine popularity among many peasants, there was a wholly different side to his treatment of the Indians. While Ubico had abolished a system of debt peonage early in his administration, he also instituted vagrancy laws which basically allowed authorities to pick up any peasant who could not provide proof of employment and to deliver the latter to the landlords for penal labor. In this manner, the government could control the rural populations while the large landowners depended on the authorities for an adequate supply of workers.<sup>60</sup> This is not the side of the regime that Des Portes got to see during the trip, of course. As far as the minister knew, the Indians' "gratitude and loyalty [to Ubico] were patently evident". The American minister readily identified with Ubico's patronizing attitude toward local Indians, because he held similar feelings for the 400 "Negro families" that worked his farm in North Carolina. In this regard the president turned out to have a lot in common with the plantation owners who Des Portes knew from his home state.<sup>61</sup> Clearly then, this could not be a Fascist dictator.

After the trip, Des Portes enthusiastically reported that Ubico was a "most delightful and entertaining host". He found that the personal contact with Ubico was "the most gratifying and personally satisfactory result" of the undertaking. Through such personal contact, Des Portes was able to establish that Ubico was not physically or mentally sick (as rumors had it) and that the president was in fact "a man of extraordinary intelligence, ability and keen perception". Touching on the more general effects of the trip, Des Portes claimed that Guatemalan army officers were delighted with the president's decision to take the Americans along with him: "they have been fearful of Fascist tendencies in the Chief Executive, and our association with him is believed by them to denote his rejection of such influences and his decision to cooperate with the United States in every action of his administration".<sup>62</sup>

The State Department was greatly relieved that Ubico was finally warming up to the American minister again. After some years in which Ubico had been very withdrawn, the latest road trip "indicates that Mr. DesPortes has been successful in making himself persona grata to president Ubico, which is of the greatest importance in the conduct of our relations with Guatemala".<sup>63</sup>

During the months following the inspection trip, Des Portes and Ubico grew closer. Personal interviews between the minister and the president became more common than

---

<sup>59</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 512, February 23, 1938, (M1280, Roll4), Jorge Ubico: 87.

<sup>60</sup> Grieb, *Guatemalan caudillo*, 35.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 1, pages 46-47.

<sup>62</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 512, February 23, 1938, (M1280, Roll4), Jorge Ubico: 87.

<sup>63</sup> Drew (Division of American Republic Affairs) to Duggan, untitled memorandum, (March 3, 1938, (M1280, Roll4), Jorge Ubico: 87.

they had ever been.<sup>64</sup> The caudillo continued to make dramatic signs of good-will, which were greatly appreciated by Des Portes. Slowly but surely, the legation revisited its interpretation of Ubico as a Fascist sympathizer. By the beginning of 1938, its opinion of him was merely that he was “undoubtedly an opportunist in his international relations and astute enough to play Democratic and Fascist influences against each other”. In the domestic field, Des Portes reported, Ubico seemed “satisfied to consider his Government, however dictatorial it may be, as being based on democratic principles”.<sup>65</sup>

Another point on which Des Portes and Ubico grew particularly close eventually was their common concern for the threat of “exotic ideologies” and foreign aggression. While the Department had shown appreciation for Des Portes’ improved relations with Ubico, this minor personal triumph on the minister’s side was buried under Washington’s concerns for the rise of Fascism in Europe. Starting in 1937, the Department produced a steady stream of instructions which related to its inter-American policy in opposition to “totalitarian” influences from Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan. These instructions prioritized reporting on German, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese activities in Latin America. Furthermore, the Department was very anxious to get pan-American approval for all its public statements on events in Europe, requiring legation personnel to pry diplomatic statements in support of these policies on a very regular basis.<sup>66</sup> Compared to the sheer volume of instructions and reports on these matters, as well as the importance that the Department obviously assigned to them, interest in local affairs definitely took a back seat.

While American politics and public opinion remained divided on the nature of the threat posed by European Fascism, minister Des Portes in particular and the American

---

<sup>64</sup> As an illustrative sample, consult: Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, June 15, 1938, PR Guatemala, Box 23, cl. 800: Miscellaneous; Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, February 27, 1939, PR Guatemala, Box 23, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive; Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, June 15, 1939, PR Guatemala, Box 23, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive; Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 279, June 15, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 1, cl. 710: Japanese Activities; Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 429, October 28, 1937, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 1, cl. 800: Guatemala.; Walter McKinney (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, December 6, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities. Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with President Ubico, September 23, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities; Walter McKinney (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with President Ubico, December 6, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

<sup>65</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 533, May 15, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800.C: Communism.

<sup>66</sup> A representative sampling of such instructions: Frazer to Erwin, unnumbered telegram, February 5, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 36, cl. 820: Military Affairs; Welles to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, May 7, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 36, cl. 820: Military Affairs; Hull to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, June 27, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 49, cl. 824: Equipment and Supplies; Welles to Certain American Diplomatic and Consular Officers in Latin America, July 5, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, cl. 800: Honduras; Berle to the U.S. Embassies and Legations in Latin America, September 20, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 121: Cultural and Educational Attaché; Berle to Albert H. Cousins, Jr. (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i.), Instruction 318, October 21, 1940, PR Honduras, Box 58, cl. 820.02: Propaganda.

diplomatic corps more generally were early converts to the idea that the Americas were threatened by Japanese imperialism and German Nazism.<sup>67</sup> Already in 1937, Des Portes reported on alleged Japanese designs on Lower California (Mexico). Throughout the following years, Des Portes' reports showed a rising concern for German threats to the Americas. In Guatemala, the biggest threat came from Nazi attempts to assimilate the large German colony; to spread discontent among the Indian peons on German *fincas*; and to bribe or otherwise influence important government officials. After the start of the war in Europe, Des Portes became convinced that the United States should take a much tougher stand against the Nazis. In May 1940 Des Portes drafted a report at his own initiative—which he admitted was somewhat presumptive—about the dangers of U.S. passivity in the face of German aggression. The minister argued that “the American nations must not stand, like the European democracies, gaping at the approaching storm and hoping that it will pass them by even if others get wet (...) it seems desirable to take immediate diplomatic steps to frustrate in so far as possible any German effort to establish bases in this Hemisphere, either in the European colonies or the American Republics. We must not repeat the mistake of European democracies in passively awaiting a German attack when our national safety is at stake”.<sup>68</sup>

While the Department and the Guatemalan legation agreed early on that Fascism was a major threat, Ubico had his own monsters to fight. In the general's worldview, it was not Fascism that threatened his reign, but Communism: his catch-all phrase for everything reeking of Mexican influences, labor activity, or political opposition. While Des Portes tried to open Ubico's eyes to the dangers of the Right, Ubico tried to convince the minister of those from Left. In July, 1938, Señora de Ubico told an American citizen that the United States was not active enough in combating Communism. At the presidential palace it was believed that Communist tendencies—possibly Ubico's interpretation of New Deal measures—made the United States an unreliable partner.<sup>69</sup> Some months later, the president himself lectured Des Portes on the dangers of Communistic labor demands on American industry. If he were president of the United States, the general asserted, he would end labor disputes in five minutes.<sup>70</sup> In another personal talk between the president and the minister, Ubico warned that his friendship for the United States had its limitations: “Guatemala will follow the policy of the United States as long as it is not Communistic”.<sup>71</sup>

To the legation staff, Ubico's “distrust of genuinely democratic Government”, and his tendency to “profoundly confuse democracy and Communism” were supremely

---

<sup>67</sup> Gilderhus, *Second Century*, 91-96.

<sup>68</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1256, May 15, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 3, cl. 711: War. Peace. Friendship. Alliance.

<sup>69</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 697, September 24, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: Guatemala.

<sup>70</sup> Walter McKinney (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with President Ubico, December 6, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

<sup>71</sup> Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with President Ubico, September 23, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

frustrating.<sup>72</sup> According to the legation, the threat of Communism in Guatemala was actually negligible, as it considered the native Indian workers too docile and passive to take an interest in that doctrine. The only possible converts were disgruntled middle-class Ladinos and former soldiers, but only in so far as the government was actually driving them in the arms of the Communists by its suppressive actions.<sup>73</sup> The appeal that Fascism had to members of the military officer corps posed a much more serious risk to the government's safety, according to the legation, but Ubico continued to overestimate the dangers of Communism at the expense of his alertness to the Fascist danger.<sup>74</sup>

Whether it was his developing working relationship with minister Des Portes; signals from the American government; a concern for his image in the American press; or genuine irritation over the behavior of some Nazi Party members in Guatemala can not be ascertained. Roughly toward the end of 1938, Ubico did exchange his anti-Communist rhetoric for the anti-Fascist kind. The issues which preoccupied the general—fear of Mexico, the Belize dispute, and development of the Guatemalan military—remained the same, but were now dressed up differently: Ubico told the legation at various times that German agents had infiltrated the Mexican government; that the war in Europe might necessitate a Guatemalan seizure of Belize if Great Britain were ever subdued by Nazi aggression; and that his country needed a standing army of at least 70,000 men armed with American weapons if it was to play a useful role in any potential conflict. The legation was not unaware of Ubico's manipulation of local issues, but was satisfied that the general no longer underestimated the dangers of Fascism.<sup>75</sup>

That Des Portes and Ubico were back on speaking terms did not mean that all fears of Fascist influences in the Guatemalan government had disappeared. In the eyes of the Americans, the president himself was now free from suspicion. But the fact remained that the Guatemalan government had dealt with Fascist governments in the past. If this had not been Ubico's doing, then there must be Nazis in his cabinet. Already in June 1938, the secretary of legation reported rumors that ministers Carlos Salazar, Roderico Anzueto, and José Gonzáles Campo were Fascist sympathizers.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, Des Portes reported, there were many disgruntled army officers who would

---

<sup>72</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 697, September 24, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: Guatemala.

<sup>73</sup> Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 759, December 13, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800.B: Communism.

<sup>74</sup> McKinney to the Secretary of State, Despatch 759, December 13, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

<sup>75</sup> John M. Cabot (U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, February 5, 1940, PR Guatemala, Box 29, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive; Des Portes, Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, June 21, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 3, cl. 711: War. Peace. Friendship. Alliance; Hartwell Johnson (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Guatemala), Memorandum of Conversation with Ubico, August 14, 1941, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

<sup>76</sup> McKinney to the Secretary of State, Despatch 619, June 14, 1938, (M1280, Roll 2) Political Affairs 1321.

like to see a regime change for “selfish or ulterior motives”, and were liable to seek an alliance of convenience with Nazi agents in the German colony.<sup>77</sup>

The interesting effect of this shift of the legation’s suspicions from Ubico to his underlings is that it inflated the importance that the Americans ascribed to the Guatemalan president as a guard against Fascist scheming. In an informal letter to Laurence Duggan, Des Portes wrote that he had worried about Ubico’s Fascist tendencies in the past, but that the president was now “grand” towards him. As long as the caudillo remained in power, U.S.-Guatemalan relations would be satisfactory. The very fact that Ubico was now openly friendly to the United States made Des Portes fear that the president would become a target for Fascist plots: “he shows it [friendliness to the U.S.] so plainly in every way that I am fearful the Germans or Italians may try some plot against him”. “As soon as the German and Italian Ministers found”, Des Portes continued:

...that they had no more influence with President Ubico they started a secret friendship with General Anzueto. Of course, as you know, General Anzueto has great presidential ambitions, but he is now being very closely watched by the President. I have been very much tempted to inform President Ubico in some of our informal talks, just what General Anzueto is doing and of his activities, but I have thought it best not to do it so far. But on the other hand, it would have a very serious effect on our relations if anything should happen to President Ubico and General Anzueto should gain control here.

The quote illustrates just how effective Ubico’s personal diplomacy was. And as long as other military leaders were under suspicion for Fascist inclinations, it was vitally important, in Des Portes’ view, that the president was secure. A hint of doubt about the importance of a noninterference policy, when compared to the Fascist danger, is evident from Des Portes’ inclination to warn Ubico about Anzueto’s skullduggery. From late 1938 to the end of his tenure, Des Portes remained convinced that “[a]s long as President Ubico is in power, I do not think that we need be fearful of any German, Italian, or Japanese influence here”.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.2 *Winning hearts and minds in Honduras and El Salvador*

While the Department concentrated on events in Europe, the Carías administration geared its policy toward that of the United States. Shortly after the 1937 confirmation of Carías’ continuance in office, the administration (possibly in an effort to neutralize local rumors that the United States opposed *continuismo*) began to model much of its “policy” toward Europe and Asia on that of the United States. So in March 1938, the Carías government declared on its own initiative that it would follow United States policy regarding the Austrian *Anschluss*. Over the next months, it also declared its support, without question or delay, for U.S. neutrality policy and issued neutrality proclamations

---

<sup>77</sup> McKinney to the Secretary of State, Despatch 759, December 13, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 820.02: Nazi Activities.

<sup>78</sup> Des Portes to Laurence Duggan (Chief of the Division of American Republic Affairs), July 28, 1938, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 2, cl. 800: Guatemala.

which were practically copies of American texts.<sup>79</sup> When the United States edged toward a more pro-Allied policy, Honduras dutifully followed suit: In April 1939, Carías issued a decree which prohibited foreigners to engage in political actions connected to their home country (although neutrally worded, the decree was clearly aimed at Fascist and Nazi organizations) and in May 1940 it protested Germany's invasion of Holland and Belgium.<sup>80</sup> Before long, the legation admitted that Carías was very anti-German and, given its track record, would probably follow the United States into war if it came to that.<sup>81</sup>

Of course, such cooperation was cheap for the Carías government: it never had an international policy beyond Central America; it had few connections with either Germany or Italy; German and Italian colonies were correspondingly small; and it probably could not care less if Austria was merged with Germany. In other words, it had nothing to lose in following American policy in Europe. Actually, its association with the United States in these matters, which was given wide publicity in Honduras, probably conveyed the impression that Carías was an important ally of FDR. To the legation, the uncharacteristically swift response of the Carías government to any query about its position on European affairs was a true asset: it enabled Erwin and his colleagues to respond quickly and satisfactorily to any State Department instruction on the subject. Over time, Carías' quick and cheap cooperation on European matters overshadowed his intransigence on local matters that truly mattered to him like the boundary dispute with Nicaragua—an issue that was eventually dropped from Washington's list of priorities anyway.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 236, March 29, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 35, cl. 800: Political Affairs; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 638, March 30, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711: War. Peace, Friendship. Alliance; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 863, November 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Hull to the U.S. Legations in Central America, December 15, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 56, December 16, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 907, December 21, 1937, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Welles to Erwin, Despatch 221, December 22, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 915, December 30, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 941, January, 29, 1940, PR Honduras, Box 57, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals.

<sup>80</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 16, June 21, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/II, cl. 800: Honduras and Hull to the U.S. Legations in Central America, May 13, 1940, PR Honduras, Box 57, cl. 711.1: Joint Declaration.

<sup>81</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 509, November 16, 1938, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1938, cl. 800: Honduras and Salter to the Secretary of State, Despatch 822, October 3, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/I, cl. 800: Honduras.

<sup>82</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 907, December 21, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, Vol. VII, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals; Fred K. Salter (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Honduras), untitled memorandum, March 28, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 35, Vol. VI, cl. 800: Political Affairs; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 528, December 6, 1938, Box 36, Vol. VII, cl. 801: Government; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 910, December 26, 1939, PR Honduras, Box 47, Vol. VII, cl. 711.1: Neutrality. Duty of Neutrals.

Confronted on one side with a very demanding State Department, as in the case of Guatemala, and on the other by a regime that was extremely helpful, Erwin had every incentive to seek a working relationship with the Cárías administration and to treat its moral shortcomings as a matter of academics. Several weeks after the completion of the *continuismo* campaign, Erwin joined a diplomatic delegation which was put together at the initiative of the Papal Nuncio in Honduras to offer his congratulations to Cárías on his successful continuance in power. Somewhat apologetically, Erwin reported that he could not have “tactfully refuse[d] to participate” in the Nuncio’s plan. Anyway, “[t]he population as a whole appears to accept it [continuismo] as a fait accompli, and there is now less discussion of the political policy involved in this arbitrary extension of the Presidential term than was the case before it was consummated”.<sup>83</sup> The State Department showed no interest in the event.

Legation’s reports on the successful *continuismo* campaign were among the last in-depth reports on the local political scene *per se* before the War. The State Department’s demands for reports of the activities on local “totalitarian” agents taxed the limited capacities of the small legation. By 1941, at the latest, the legation’s activities consisted almost completely of research and activities related to the European war. Cárías meanwhile, was hard at work to outdo the Yankees in anti-totalitarian measures. In 1939 Cárías cleverly issued a decree against “anti-democratic” activities—a decree that only formalized his suppression of any form of opposition. Some months later, the president cut all government subsidies to the local newspaper *El Cronista*, which was considered pro-Axis by the legation. In June, 1940, Honduras eagerly consented to a U.S. proposition for “combined staff conversations” on a coordinated military response to foreign threats. U.S. officers who visited Honduras for the talks were very pleasantly surprised by the government’s more than cooperative attitude. The next month, the semi-official newspaper *La Epoca* began to actively propagate the government’s anti-totalitarian standpoints and the regime itself stepped up activities against supposedly Nazi propaganda emanating, it said, from the German legation in Guatemala.<sup>84</sup>

Recent historical research showed that actual activities by German or Italian agents small and ineffectual compared to the draconian measures taken against them in

---

<sup>83</sup> Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1212, December 27, 1940, PR Honduras, Box 57, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive. *Continuismo*.

<sup>84</sup> On Honduran war measures: Erwin to the Secretary of State, Telegram 16, June 21, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/I, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 724, June 24, 1939, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 1939/I, cl. 800: Honduras; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1037, May 21, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 3, cl. 820.02: *El Cronista*; Hull to the U.S. Legations and Embassies in Latin America, June 3, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 711: Staff Conversations; Erwin, Memorandum of Conversation at the Presidential Palace, June 14, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 711: Staff Conversations; Unknown author, Memorandum of Staff Conversations between Representatives of the Government of Honduras and the Military and Naval Services of the United States, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 711: Staff Conversations; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1070, July 1, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 3, cl. 820.02: Anti-Totalitarian Propaganda. On Legation’s perception of *El Cronista*: Salter to the Secretary of State, Despatch 823, October 3, 1939, Box 2, cl. 891: Attitude of the Honduran Press.

Central America.<sup>85</sup> Some of the legislation and action against the totalitarian threat may have been provoked by a genuine “fifth columnist scare”, as the legation reported at one point. It is clear however that Carías also had an ulterior motive for playing up his measures against the Axis. In May, 1940, an agent of Carías visited the legation to warn Erwin that due to Carías’ effective measures against them, the local Nazis were now seeking a rapprochement with the Liberals and other enemies of the regime. Five months later a belated revolt of the Liberal Party against the recent continuismo campaign actually broke out, but was very quickly suppressed by the authorities. Carías was quick to point out to Erwin that the defunct Liberal Party could not have pulled off any type of military action without the active collaboration of the Nazis.<sup>86</sup>

As American fear of the so-called “Fifth Column” developed, Carías’ assertions about a supposed alliance between the totalitarians and the Honduran Liberal Party were fully adopted by Erwin and his legation. In 1941, when the Honduran authorities alerted the American Legation about another plot by Honduran exiles in collaboration with Nazi agents, the Legation reported that “[i]t has long been suspected and thought probable that the Nazi organization would welcome an opportunity to assist any conspiracy to overthrow the present Honduran Government which is definitely anti-Nazi”.<sup>87</sup> Carías’ efforts to align himself with U.S. policies could not have been more fruitful: By presenting himself as a staunch protector of “democracy”, he had convinced the American legation that his opponents could only be the very opposite. The situation that existed only 4 years earlier—when the Honduran Liberal Party’s claim that Carías was a Fascist sympathizer received considerable attention from the Americans—was now reversed.

Throughout the late 1930s the American legation in San Salvador was considerably less alarmed about Martínez’ supposed Fascist sympathies than the outside world was. A likely explanation for the legation’s peace of mind is found in a combination of factors. First of all, Martínez kept a low profile while Ubico and Carías were busy changing constitutions to fit their needs and Somoza armed for battle with the Nicaraguan president. The Salvadoran general’s declarations in favor of constitutionalism and his (unsuccessful) attempts at mediation in Nicaragua appear to have impressed Corrigan. The U.S. minister reserved his diatribes against dictatorship for Salvador’s neighbors while Martínez’ reputation remained largely untarnished by continuismo until about 1938.

---

<sup>85</sup> See Chapter 6, pages 207-209.

<sup>86</sup> Albert H. Cousins, Jr. (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1293, March 11, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 1, cl. 800: Honduras. Many files in that same folder deal with the supposed connection between the Honduran Liberal Party and German agents. Also see: Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 105, May 31, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, Vol. 2, cl. 820.02; RDG, Memorandum, October 21, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 800: Attempt to overthrow the Honduran Government; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1140, October 22, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 1, Vol. 1, cl. 800: Attempt to overthrow the Honduran Government.

<sup>87</sup> Cousins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1293, March 11, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 1, cl. 800: Honduras.

Related to the previous point, Martínez' self-identification as a proponent of constitutionalism was not appreciated by his neighbors, who appeared to be usurpers by comparison. This matter was complicated by the fact that many politicians who were put on the sidelines in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua initially sought the protection of the Salvadoran government. This made San Salvador, for a while at least, a seedbed of revolutionary plotting. Add to that mix the traditional rivalry between Guatemala and Salvador and it becomes clear why Martínez felt, around the middle of the decade, that he was surrounded by hostile states.<sup>88</sup>

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that the Martínez government tried to curry the favor of the powerful Americans. The language of the Good Neighbor policy was translated by the Salvadoran government and official press to fit the circumstances of its regional position. The "international peace" and "inter-American solidarity" aspects of Roosevelt's foreign policy were appropriated by Salvadoran authorities and vigorously pushed in the national press. The message, for anyone who cared to listen, was clear: if peace-loving El Salvador ever got embroiled with its neighbors, the fault was not on her side.

Frazer was naturally eager to jump on the Good Neighbor bandwagon in El Salvador. It was, after all, his job to promote the Roosevelt administration's policy there. On several occasions the minister cheerfully told local newspapers that, yes, the Roosevelt administration was interested in peace and inter-American solidarity, and, yes, Presidents Martínez and Roosevelt did seem to agree on those issues. At one point, Martínez was so flattered by a press interview Frazer had given that he wrote him a personal thank-you note. In response, the minister wrote that the interviews represented no less than his "heartfelt" admiration for the governments' pro-American standpoints.<sup>89</sup>

Yet Martínez was preparing for his continuance in office at the same time. While Frazer never commented publically on *continuismo*, interested local observers could easily have gained the impression that the American legation approved of it. Off the record, the minister regarded Martínez' "reelection" and the supposed Nazi influence—that *The New York Times*, for example, thought to be behind it—as philosophical matter: To the Latin mind, Frazer wrote to the Department, "a strongly centralized Government, tantamount to a dictatorship suppressing all but the outer form of representative government, does not constitute a denial of the aims of American democracy as long as it is free from the label of Fascism or Naziism, however similar it may be in actual

---

<sup>88</sup> Salvador; Corrigan to the Secretary of State, Despatch 454, October 18, 1935, PR El Salvador, Vol. 136, cl. 800: El Salvador; Corrigan to the Secretary of State, Despatch 777, August 26, 1936, PR El Salvador, Box 4, Vol. 5, 800: Honduras; Corrigan to the Secretary of State, Despatch 786, September 5, 1936, PR El Salvador, Box 4, Vol. 5, 800: Honduras.

<sup>89</sup> Meredith Nicholson (U.S. Minister to Nicaragua) to Hoffman, May 5, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 17, Vol. II, cl. 123: Frazer; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 668, August 7, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 17, Vol. II, cl. 123: Frazer; Frazer to Maximiliano H. Martínez (President of El Salvador), April 26, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 17, Vol. II, cl. 123: Frazer; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 554, April, 26, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 17, Vol. II, cl. 123: Frazer.

form”.<sup>90</sup> As it was, the minister and his superiors in Washington were satisfied to leave these philosophical questions for what they were and to focus on the Good Neighbor. And by that measure, Frazer reported, El Salvador was the country where the Good Neighbor policy “has borne the finest fruit”.<sup>91</sup>

#### 4. TRADITIONAL DICTATORSHIP VS. FASCISM

Initial concerns in Washington about the Fascist inclinations of the Southern neighbors abated by the time the war broke out in Europe. The caudillos’ goodwill campaigns convinced policymakers that theirs was a familiar, non-threatening, traditional sort of dictatorship. A Department study that leaned heavily on reports from the field, argued that “dictatorship as distinct from Fascism so-called [is] no new phenomenon in the American Republics and (...) were one of the American Republics *at this time* to adopt Fascist forms of government, its Fascism would be merely a new cloak for traditional Latin-American personalist dictatorship”.

The caveat “at this time” was significant, however. Developments such as the centralization of power, nationalistic policies toward foreign (American) companies and “radical” social policies aimed at the Indian masses, did indicate that the particular mix of authoritarianism, nationalism, and socialism that characterized Fascism was present in many Latin Republics. Hence, the Department noted, the development of an “embryo Social Nationalism” was a matter of continued, if not particularly acute, concern.

In Central America, the Department argued, there was reason to remain alert because “Naziism and Fascism are said to have made some converts in high Government circles”. That the caudillos themselves had been successful in dissociating themselves from Fascism in the Yankee mind, however, is evident from the Department’s assertion that:

*Even* such a self-admitted dictator as President Ubico of Guatemala has solemnly assured American representatives that he will oppose in every way the spread of European rightist totalitarian principles in this country and will follow the lead of the United States as long as this country [*sic*] does not swing to Communism.<sup>92</sup>

The legations in Central America were no less enthusiastic. As the United States moved ever closer to involvement in the European war, American ministers developed a symbiotic relationship with the local regimes. The groundwork for that relationship had been laid during the late 1930s. It should be stressed that the caudillos themselves played a major role in the development of a cordial working relationship by adopting the American concerns for a Fascist threat and representing their own governments as an important barrier against it. But the fact that the caudillos were ultimately more

---

<sup>90</sup> Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 62, February 9, 1938, PR El Salvador, Box 13, Vol. VI, cl. 800: Political Affairs.

<sup>91</sup> Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 695, September 6, 1939, PR El Salvador, Box 20, Vol. VI, cl. 711: Peace. War. Friendship.

<sup>92</sup> Welles to the U.S. Legations and Embassies in Latin America, October 21, 1938, PR Honduras, Box 36, cl. 820: Military Affairs. Emphasis added

successful than their opponents in appropriating anti-Fascist language was also due to pressure from Washington on the legations. Toward the end of the decade, the Department showed little or no interest in field reports on local political matters. The legations accordingly learned to put aside their concerns about local dictatorial measures and to focus on subjects of inter-American solidarity and foreign threats thereto.

Up to about 1939, the collaboration given by the local caudillos, primarily in the form of support for U.S. international declarations and initiatives pertaining to the European situation, allowed Washington to present itself as an important international leader in favor of peace. From the standpoint of Central America, such international cooperation was cheap in the sense that it never had much of foreign policy toward Europe anyway. Washington, however, considered Central American support an important asset to its international position. It should not, therefore, be surprising that in the end the legations' function during the war was to serve as a catalyst for allied cooperation. Their old functions of local power brokers or independent political observers, functions which the legations had performed more or less successfully in the past, moved to the background.