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

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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>

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

Issue Date: 2012-06-07

Chapter 8

THE POST-WAR CONJUNCTURE

The embassies and the democratic opening, 1944-1947

The principal defect of a policy of non-intervention accompanied by propaganda on behalf of democratic doctrines is that it simultaneously stimulates dictatorships and popular opposition to them.

~ Ambassador Walter Thurston, 1944 ¹

Ambassador Walter Thurston was in a unique position to qualify the paradoxes in American foreign policy as it affected Latin America toward the end of the Second World War: He was a career officer whose experience in Latin American affairs dated back for decades; he claimed a role in the development of the non-intervention principle; he was stationed in El Salvador where opposition to *caudillismo* first manifested itself in 1944; and thanks to, among others, Winnall Dalton, he was fairly well-acquainted with the ideas and ambitions of the new opposition groups. Furthermore, he had seen it all before: In 1920, Thurston was the American chargé d'affaires in Guatemala during the revolution that ended the 22 year rule of Manuel Estrada Cabrera. Remembering his earlier tenure in Guatemala, Thurston reported to the Department in 1944 that:

Members on duty in Latin America during and immediately following Word War I may recall the profound impression created by many of the pronouncements of Woodrow Wilson – and in particular by his advocacy of the right of self-determination. [I] was in Guatemala at that time and observed with interest that this doctrine – undoubtedly enunciated by President Wilson [*sic.*] with respect to European problems – was seized upon by those in opposition to the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera as being a call addressed directly to them to make effective their own right to self-determination.

The ambassador considered this development as something of a handicap – the misrepresentation of American ideals as applying to Latins interfered with a proper execution of the nonintervention principle. Thus, throughout the final years of the War, Thurston found himself to be the subject of reproach among oppositionists who

¹ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1154, January 8, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 98, vol. XIII, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

demanded that the United States back up its lofty words with action against the local dictatorships.²

It was certainly inaccurate, even somewhat fatalistic, of Thurston to believe that nonintervention and democratic propaganda caused dictatorship and opposition to it, as suggested in the opening quotation. Putting the problem in those terms at the same time exaggerates the role of the United States in local politics and underestimates the ability of the United States to determine how its words and actions are perceived by Latin Americans. In fact, Washington had for years been rather careless in word and action: On the one hand, it continued to pay lip-service to the Good Neighbor and nonintervention while war measures touched almost all aspects of the lives Latin Americans. On the other hand, it spread the gospel of democracy while it cooperated with the dictators. Whereas such paradoxes might have gone unnoticed at other times, they seriously undermined the credibility of U.S. policy around the end of the war when the old dictatorships faced the challenge of democratically inspired opposition. Thurston accurately gauged that situation when he reported that “by according dictators who seize or retain power unconstitutionally the same consideration extended to honestly elected presidents we not only impair our moral leadership but foment the belief that our democratic professions are empty propaganda and that we are in fact simply guided by expediency”.³

Considering that previous policy had been careless—at least as far as the subject of democracy vs. dictatorship was concerned—Thurston’s advise, as related in the previous chapter, to subject that policy to “an empirical search for improvement and careful study of plans for revision” was basically sound. The only problem was that the Central American opposition movements made their move before anyone at the Department had a chance to look into the problem. The result was that—aside from the careful planning of such postwar projects as the United Nations, Organization of American States, World Bank, etc—the American policy with regard to political developments in Latin America maintained a quality of trial and error for some years after the end of the war. In the end, solving the dilemma between—again, in Thurston’s words—reverting to the “folly of intervention” or ignoring the “evil of dictatorship” became the responsibility of the practitioners of diplomacy: the Foreign Service.

1. THE CONJUNCTURE

The end of the Second World War was a historical watershed for Europe and East-Asia, which were directly affected by the war and the following peace treaties. The same is true for South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, where anti-colonial movements were revived. Though Latin America had been touched by war only indirectly, that region also experienced a period of profound changes and turmoil between roughly 1944 and

² Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1990, September 7, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 93, cl. 124: Records. Correspondence.

³ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1154, January 8, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 98, vol. XIII, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

1948—that is, between the end of the World War and the beginning of the Cold War. As in other parts of the world, this period was initially characterized by the growing strength of social democratic forces. But unlike the situation Western Europe and Japan, for example, this development was short-lived. More conservative groups would eventually regain power in most Latin American nations.

Characterizing this so-called post-war conjuncture, Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough note that during the final year of the war and the first year after the war democracy was strengthened in the liberal states of Costa Rica, Colombia, and Chile; significant moves in the direction of democracy were made in Ecuador, Cuba, Panama, Peru, Venezuela, and Mexico; and a transition from military rule to democracy was accomplished in Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. Furthermore, the dictatorial regimes in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay encountered serious opposition from the democratic left.⁴

According to Bethell and Roxborough, the momentous changes of the postwar years originated both in a “strong Liberal tradition” in Latin America that dated back to the late 19th century and on the growing strength and importance of the middle and lower classes, which were spurred to action by wartime inflation. But the editors also ascribe a large role to international developments and the role of the United States therein. The “principal” factor in the developments of 1944 to 1946, according to Bethell and Roxborough, was the Victory of the allies:

As it became certain that the allies would win the war (...) and as the nature of the postwar international political and economic order and the hegemonic position of the United States within it became clear, the dominant groups in Latin America, including the military, recognized the need to make some necessary political and ideological adjustments and concessions.

Such signals as the United States was emanating about the “nature” of the “postwar order”, however, were probably not intended for Central American audiences. Bethell and Roxborough argue that it was the “extraordinary outpouring of wartime propaganda in favor of U.S. political institutions” that attuned local leaders to the need to make some “ideological adjustments” and that stimulated oppositionists to press their case.⁵

Though agitation for more popular participation and democracy was successful up to about 1946, old elites and new, professional army groups managed to take back the

⁴ Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, “The postwar conjuncture in Latin America: democracy, labor, and the Left”, in: idem eds., *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944-1948* (New York 1992) 1-32, there 3-6. The case for the existence of a postwar conjuncture in Latin America was first made in: Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, “Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War: Some reflections on the 1945-8 conjuncture”, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 20 (1988) 167-189. A more detailed account, by the same author, of the role of the United States in this period is: Leslie Bethell, “From the Second World War to the Cold War, 1944-54”, in: Abraham F. Lowenthal ed., *Exporting democracy: The United States and Latin America* (Baltimore 1991) 41-71. Though not directly relevant to the current text, the articles collected in David Rock ed. *Latin America in the 1940s. War and postwar transitions* (Berkeley et al. 1994) rivals Bethell and Roxborough’s analysis by their focus on internal, rather than international developments. The book rarely discusses Central America, though.

⁵ Bethell and Roxborough, “The postwar conjuncture”, 6-7.

powers they lost in nearly every Latin America country after that date except, perhaps, Guatemala. Again, internal developments lie at the root of this development: Bethell and Roxborough note that the old elites were never really defeated by the new forces, they merely lost their nerve temporarily. Moreover, the middle and lower classes never formed a single front, divided as they were both by their class interests and by racial antagonism. Again, the United States had a role to play in the reassertion of authoritarian rule in the south. On the one hand, the refusal of the United States to extend any form of aid to Latin America and the Truman administration's insistence that the neighboring republics attract private investments from the north gave the old ruling elites an economic incentive to move against labor activities, which were assumed to repel American investors. On the other hand, the increasingly belligerent, anticommunist rhetoric emanating from Washington at least legitimized a turn to the political right in Latin America. Bethell and Roxborough maintain, however, that anticommunist ideology had long been a factor in Latin American culture, so the United States' Cold War stance did not necessarily cause its southern neighbors to return to authoritarian modes of government. In fact, Bethell and Roxborough do not provide a conclusive answer on the question of whether or not the United States had a role to play in the demise of democratic fervor in Latin America.⁶

As in previous chapters, the current chapter will focus on the perceptions of American diplomats "on the ground" and on how these informed their reaction to the "conjuncture". Therefore, this chapter rivals the analysis that Thomas M. Leonard set out in his book *The United States and Central America, 1944-1949: Perceptions of Political Dynamics*. As the subtitle of the book indicates, it also deals with American perceptions of the events in this period, specifically those of the embassies. Although this chapter and the work of Leonard are similar in many details, they are based on widely different assumptions. Like many works of the 1980s, *Perceptions* deals with the events of the 1940s from the standpoint of the Central American Crisis: "Greater awareness of the pressures for change between 1944 and 1949 contributes to a better understanding of the contemporary crisis", as Leonard puts it.⁷ And as the introduction of his book indicates, it basically regards the 1930s and 1940s as an extension of prewar imperialism and postwar Cold War policies. The current chapter rather assumes that the experience of the late 1930s and World War was multifaceted and included both measured opposition to- and cooperation with the isthmian dictatorships. In 1944, it was all but clear which one of these roads would be taken in the future.

As we shall see, there was at least one influential "paladin of democracy" in the Department in 1945: assistant secretary Spruille Braden. Curiously, Leonard neglects to devote much attention to Braden's so-called "policy regarding dictatorships and disreputable governments", stating only that: "Braden expressed interest in encouraging

⁶ *Idem*, 16-23.

⁷ Thomas M. Leonard, *The United States and Central America, 1944-1949: Perceptions of Political Dynamics* (Tuscaloosa 1984) ix.

democracy throughout the region, but the limitations of the U.S. nonintervention policy provided only the opportunity to express support for Central American constitutionalism”.⁸ In line with his neglect of the Braden policy, Leonard also ignores much, if not all, of the discussion on that policy in the American Foreign Service. As an example, Leonard does not even offer passing mention of Simmons’ resistance to the diplomatic recognition of Aguirre, or to the latter’s efforts to define Castañeda—subjects that will be discussed at some length in this chapter.⁹

By 1945, the Department of State in Washington was well-aware of the growing democratic fervor in Latin America and would eventually develop a policy to match it.¹⁰ With its “policy regarding dictatorships and disreputable governments”, the United States publically denounced the most notorious dictators of the Hemisphere: Perón in Argentina, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and Somoza in Nicaragua. With regard to the latter, the State Department began to express its disappointment with continued authoritarian rule in Nicaragua directly following the war by withholding military aid and other types of assistance to Somoza. The real test, however, came in 1947: facing urban, middle class opposition similar to that in other Central American countries, Somoza tried to assuage the opposition by stepping down and having an uncle of his “elected” to the presidency. When the uncle in question presumed to fare an independent course and tried to oust Somoza as chief of the Guardia, the latter committed a military coup and had another uncle appointed to the presidency. At this point, the United States decided that Somoza had gone far enough and withheld diplomatic recognition from the new puppet government. This might appear to be an ill-conceived action in the light of Martínez’ successful defiance of non-recognition, but from the late 1940s perspective it is an understandable choice since political developments in the region seemed to be favorable to democratic change and Somoza was facing internal opposition. Not recognizing his government might just tip the balance in favor of the liberal opposition without committing the United States to more drastic acts.

As it turned out, however, the forces of reaction were gaining strength around 1947 and Somoza, perhaps one of the most talented political tacticians his country ever knew, managed to keep his opponents divided and his hold on power unrelenting. Because of Somoza’s successful defiance in the context of a general return to ultra-conservative politics in the region, combined with a wish to promote Latin American solidarity in the counsels of the OAS and the UN, the United States decided to abandon its attempts to oust Somoza in 1948. In that same year at the inter-American conference in Bogotá, the American Republics jointly adopted the principle of continuance of diplomatic relations whenever government leadership changed, putting a definite halt to the use of non-recognition as a diplomatic weapon. While it would take a while before Somoza was back into the good graces of the American government, the recognition of his regime

⁸ Leonard, *Perceptions*, 10.

⁹ See: idem, *Perceptions*, 60-63 and section 3.2 of the current chapter.

¹⁰ Details to be discussed below.

signaled the end of American policy of discouraging dictatorship. Around the same time, the threat of the Soviet Union became an issue in inter-American relations. For the next forty years or so, the specter of Communism was one of the most important determinants of American policy toward Central America.¹¹

Despite the rather inglorious end to the American attempt to elbow out Somoza, historians have since debated the significance of that brief episode. “[These] actions were the strongest argument to date against those who claim that the United States always supported the Somoza regime”, according to Paul Coe Clark, “it demonstrated the administration’s sincerity regarding its policy of supporting democratic governments in Latin America [and] it had special meaning when applied to a dictatorial regime long associated with the U.S.”. Andrew Crawley agrees that “the sense of affinity that the United States felt with rulers whose authority derived from popular consent helped bring Somoza’s government to an end. This was not simply an end result; it was the State Department’s specific intention”. While his focus is on internal dynamics, Knut Walter at least acknowledges that U.S. opposition was the main reason for Somoza not to enter the presidential elections.¹² On the other hand, Leonard has argued that the postwar policy of opposition to dictators was merely a case of paying lip service to high ideals while the Truman administration focused on Europe. The fact that Somoza was eventually recognized supports that line of analysis, according to Leonard. Bethell appears to second this argument with the observation that U.S. support for democracy was merely rhetorical after 1946 and *direct* support for democracy before that time was highly ineffectual. Schoultz believes the Braden policy was really completely out of step with general thinking in the State Department, which stressed that Latins were unfit for democracy. In a reinterpretation of the conjuncture from a Latin American perspective, David Rock argues that: “The support of the United States for democratic change in Latin America in 1945 was mainly due to a desire to establish client states that could be used to support the United States in the United Nations.”¹³ While the current chapter will not solve the debate specifically around U.S. policy in Nicaragua, it will address the question of the nature of U.S. policy toward dictatorship during the conjuncture.

2. BULL IN THE CHINA SHOP

Last week the U.S. Senate turned loose a bull in the Latin American china shop. He was Spruille Braden, now confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, a big, jolly, working democrat whose object was to smash the Western Hemisphere’s dictatorial bric-a-brac.¹⁴

¹¹ Paul C. Clark, *Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the Somoza Garcia Regime, 1933-1956* (Tuscaloosa 1988) chapters 10 and 11; Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1939-1956* (Chapel Hill 1993) 129-163; Eduardo Crawley, *Dictators never die. A Portrait of Nicaragua and the Somoza Dynasty* (London 1979) 101-109.

¹² Clark, *Diplomatic relations*, 326-327 and 342; Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt*, 232; Walter, *The regime*, 144-145.

¹³ Leonard, *Search for stability*, 122-123; Bethell & Roxborough, *Latin America*, 28; Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 316-331; Rock, *Latin America*, 5-6.

¹⁴ “Latin America: Democracy’s Bull”, *TM* (November 5, 1945).

Such, at least, was *Time Magazine's* assessment of the new Assistant Secretary in 1945—and it was not far off the mark. Spruille Braden, a Montana mining engineer with the diplomatic inclinations of a cowboy, had been a political appointee to the Foreign Service during the War. Considering himself an “anti-Nazi paladin”, he had battled supposed Nazi’s and their local sympathizers in and out of official circles in Colombia, Cuba, and Argentina.¹⁵ Only during the War, when old principles of nonintervention were put aside for the cause of the allies, could a man who took such liberties with other states’ sovereignty become ambassador. And only right after the War, when democratic fervor was running high, could he have become Assistant Secretary. Braden was both one of the most colorful characters of his time and an exponent of it.

Naturally, Braden would not have accomplished much while Cordell Hull and Sumner Welles, who had built their diplomacy around the nonintervention principle, were in charge of Latin American policy. However, many personnel changes occurred at the top of the Department around the end of the War. Sumner Welles was forced into retirement by his enemies within the Government in 1943 and his supporters fell victim to a similar fate shortly thereafter. Cordell Hull, who had in fact been instrumental in Welles’ downfall, retired due to failing health in 1944. After a brief interlude when the State Department and its Latin American division were led by Edward Stettinius and Nelson Rockefeller respectively, James Byrnes became the Secretary of State in 1945. It was the latter who was ultimately responsible for bringing Braden into the Department.

Braden was stationed in Cuba when he first captured the attention of the State Department. From his Caribbean post he submitted new policy recommendations that were supposed to be in line with the progressive revolutions that were occurring all over the region. The ambassador argued that the United States could only thrive in an environment with “like-minded, friendly, and sympathetic neighbors and a high degree of hemispheric solidarity”. This condition could only be created when democracy prevailed in Latin America. The United States could further the cause of democracy in Latin America by showing “warm friendship for the democratic and reputable governments” and it should discourage dictatorship and “disreputable” governments by “treating them as something less than friends and equals”. This proposal was not a real departure from previous policy, the ambassador claimed, but the culmination of it. Calling to mind Roosevelt’s description of a “Good Neighbor” as one who “resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of other”, Braden argued that the United States could not retain its self-respect or the respect of others if it maintained friendly cooperative relations with dictatorships. In practical terms, this meant that no “special consideration” (medals, state visits, favorable mentions, etc), economic, or military aid should be given to the dictators.

Braden recognized that the non-intervention principle of the Good Neighbor could conflict with his proposals, if the United States were to dictate to others the kind of government they could have. However, argued the ambassador, while the United States

¹⁵ Charles D. Ameringer, *The Caribbean Legion. Patriots, Politicians, Soldiers of Fortune, 1946-1950* (University Park, PA, 1996) 11.

could not intervene in other countries nor tell them what kind of government would be appropriate for them, it was under no obligation to accept “as equals and friends those governments which are the embodiment of principles and practices which we abhor, distrust, and to which we are irrevocably opposed”. Anticipating critics who would argue that many countries in Latin America were not yet ready for democracy, Braden claimed that that situation was changing rapidly and that the United States should recognize the direction of current political developments of the region. Latin Americans themselves were demanding more openness and freedom, but the paradoxes of American policy—fighting dictators in Europe and cooperating with them in its own hemisphere—confused the southern neighbors. This situation could ultimately persuade them to reject the American example: “If...we fail to sustain and augment the enthusiasm for the practice of democratic ideals, the void will be filled by pernicious ‘isms’ imperiling our way of life”.

Since Braden developed his ideas while serving as the U.S. ambassador to Cuba, it should not be surprising that his policy recommendations ascribed a large role to the Foreign Service, even though that point is often glossed over by historians. In Braden’s own words:

I would underscore that all of my observations are presented in full recognition of the fact that in this, as in all other matters, the success or failure of our policies will largely depend on the competency and judgment of our representatives abroad, and that it is almost impossible either to draw any hard and fast rule for their decisions and action in a given case or to replace the practical working out of these problems in the field

On the one hand, American ambassadors needed to be on good terms with people “of all classes” in the countries to which they were accredited—not just with the governments. In that way, the “understanding and respect” of others could be cultivated even while the United States maintained formal diplomatic relations with the dictators that governed them. On the other hand, the policy was highly dependent on accurate information on local conditions. While Braden neglected to propose a “hard and fast rule” by which to distinguish the “reputable” governments from the “disreputable” kind, he did stress that the former should be based on “general popular support”. Whether such was the case—and especially where new governments were concerned—was “frequently...purely a matter of opinion and open to debate”. Especially in the case of the recognition of a new government, the United States should move with deliberation and reach a decision “only when we are so sure as possible that our decision is accurate and in keeping with the will of the people concerned”.¹⁶

The “Proposed Policy Respecting Dictatorships and Disreputable Governments in the Other American Republics” was disseminated among the Latin American field posts for comments in May 1945. Why the Department felt that its Foreign Service officers should be involved in policy making in this particular case is not altogether clear. It might be due to the inclination of Assistant Secretary Nelson Rockefeller, former chief of the

¹⁶ Hussey, Ambassador Braden’s proposed policy respecting dictatorships and disreputable governments in the other American Republics, October, 1945, Lot Files, ARA Analysis and Liaison, Box 16, folder marked Analysis and Liaison, September to November, 1945.

Coordinating Committee, to seek consensus and to prefer coordination over a top-down approach. Other factors may be the many practical issues related to the suggested policy, as set forth by Braden himself, or the preference for democratic procedures of the main supporters of such a policy. Whatever the case, comments were collected in June and July and digested in a report by the Department's Division of Research for American Republics (DRA).

The eventual 30 page report on the suggested policy was prepared by Roland D. Hussey, assistant chief of DRA. It offers a unique insight into the Foreign Service's crusading spirit, or lack thereof, shortly after the momentous victory of democracy over Fascism. While the faith in America's ability to spread its political culture and institutions to other countries had probably not been this strong since the end of the First World War, and would not be as strong until the introduction of the Alliance for Peace, the Foreign Service was still divided over the issue. To start with, Hussey himself was adamantly opposed to the policy and not shy about it. A former history professor at the University of California, Hussey had joined the Department as a consultant in 1944. Approaching the problem from an abstract angle, he found it impossible to relate to Braden's proposals which were the result of years of practical experience with both Latin American dictatorship and the effects of American pro-democratic propaganda in the hemisphere.

According to the chief, the concepts of democracy and dictatorship, or "disreputable governments", were so ill-defined in Braden's proposal as to be unworkable in practical situations. Moreover, it would obviously lead to intervention in countries that had a government the United States disapproved of—no "ingenuity in semantics", as Hussey characterized Braden's attempts to get around this subject, would long deceive the American republics. As it was, the United States was already leaning dangerously over the brink toward intervention with its many wartime projects in Latin America and Hussey clearly feared that Braden's suggestions would be the deathblow for the Good Neighbor. Hence, the report on comments from the field, which was drafted under Hussey's direction, showed a clear bias toward the opponents' views. Or, as Hussey himself wrote in the preface: "The report is meant to be solely an objective analysis of the various comments although the conclusions unavoidably reflect the judgment of the author as to the proper weights to attach to the arguments advanced".¹⁷

In all, comments from 12 different posts were collected and cited in the report; some other reports came in later. As Hussey himself summarizes:

Of the replies from the twelve missions received so far, seven are fundamentally in agreement with the recommendations of Ambassador Braden, although three contain reservations. Of the remaining five, three can be described as definitely in disagreement. The remaining two are more sympathetic but indicate that the difficulties in the way of applying the policy render it impractical.

¹⁷ Hussey to Dreier, January 25, 1946, Lot Files, Deputy Assistant Secretaries, 1945-1956, Box 2, folder marked Dictatorships, 1945-1946. For Hussey's own evaluation of the policy: Hussey to Boal, September 2, 1945, Lot Files, Deputy Assistant Secretaries, 1945-1956, Box 2, folder marked Dictatorships, 1945-1946.

Later reactions from Guatemala, Argentina, and Nicaragua were all in general agreement with Braden, although the ambassador in Nicaragua entertained some reservations. It could be said, therefore, that there was a consensus in favor of Braden's proposals, but Hussey argued in the conclusion that the favorable replies were "lacking in strong arguments" and stressed the counterarguments.

The answers from the field posts were strongly dependent on the idiosyncrasies of the local ambassadors or specific local conditions. For example, ambassador Orme Wilson, who was stationed in Haiti, felt that allowance should be made for the country's extreme backwardness and low levels of literacy, education, and political "maturity". Since Haiti also shared the island of Hispaniola with "an aggressive and ill willed dictator", Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, the United States ought not to punish the country for its lack of democratic practice. John Erwin, who wrote a very fulsome critique of Braden's policy, agreed with Wilson that some countries were just too backward to expect them to be anything but authoritarian, but also inserted something of an emotional argument in the debate when he noted that any action against the Carías dictatorship would result in a charge of ingratitude against the United States since the regime in question had, according to Erwin, provided cooperation to the limit of its ability when Washington needed it most: during the War.

On the other hand, Braden's proposals were enthusiastically received by those officers who served in relatively liberal countries. The ambassadors in Costa Rica and Uruguay reported, for example, that "liberals [in those countries] are frequently baffled and discouraged by the failure of the United States to make any distinction between their democracy and the dictatorship of other countries. Clearly the policy proposed would be welcomed" there. The most enthusiastic endorsement came from the mission in Chile, where ambassador Claude G. Bowers was stationed. Bower had served in Spain for six years during the rise of General Franco.¹⁸ Having witnessed Franco's authoritarian mode of government and his attempts to drive a wedge between the Americas and the United States, Bowers was in "complete agreement" with Braden's proposal to discourage dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere. The ambassador had always been skeptical of the Department's practical distinction between Fascism and traditional dictatorship, arguing that "the liberty of speech, the freedom of the press, the right to assemble [and] to petition for the redress of grievances are no more tolerated [under a military dictatorship] than under the systems of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco". Furthermore, the conditions for such a policy were favorable, in Bowers opinion, because the people of Latin America were themselves making impressive progress toward democracy while the United States was in a strong position due to the effectiveness of its Good Neighbor policy and its achievements during the war: "[I]f the friends of democracy do not

¹⁸ Claude G. Bowers, *My mission to Spain: Watching the rehearsal for World War II* (London 1954).

aggressively advocate their system the enemies of democracy will certainly make it their business to implant their particular ideology".¹⁹

As the responses from the Latin American field posts indicate, there was no consensus in diplomatic circles on the wisdom of Braden's proposal regarding dictatorial and disreputable governments. In fact, there were more than enough vociferous critics of the proposal. Within the State Department, however, policy was not determined by a plurality of votes or even by the weight of arguments in favor or against, but by the distribution of proponents and detractors across the bureaucratic hierarchy. It so happened that in 1945, Braden had enough backers in the right places—and, just as important perhaps, there were enough doubters in the right places—to be able to put his ideas in practice. In May he was transferred to—"released upon", as some would have it—Buenos Aires, where he clashed almost immediately with the supposedly Fascist inclined, and definitely disreputable government of Edelmiro Farrell and his ambitious Vice President Juan Perón. Braden's sojourn to Argentina has been adequately described and analyzed in numerous studies. Suffice it to say that he took great liberties with the noninterference principle of the Good Neighbor to be able to support what he thought were the regime's democratic opponents. Despite Braden's ultimate failure to bring down the "Fascist-minded" clique in Argentina, and despite stiff criticism from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and other apostles of the Good Neighbor policy in and outside the United States, Braden was appointed Assistant Secretary of State for inter-American Affairs in October 1945 in recognition of "his accurate interpretation of the policies of this Government in its relations with the present Government of the Argentine".²⁰

In his function of Assistant Secretary from 1945 to 1947, Braden applied his recipe of "formal aloofness", that is, the absence of military and economic aid, to all Latin American governments thought to be "disreputable". Moreover, several Latin American dictators, most notably Perón, but also notoriously brutal Trujillo and infamously greedy Somoza, were singled out by the Department for persecution. Braden's example also elicited imitation from American ambassadors who were inclined to exert the power of the United States in favor of the actual advancement of democracy—as opposed to the mere disapproval of dictatorship. In Brazil, which had been ruled by Getúlio Vargas since the 1930s, ambassador Adolf Berle decided "after much sweating (...) that the only way to have democracy was to have it, and that the United States was beginning to be expected to express a view". Concurrently, Berle took the very unusual step of publicizing his support for Vargas' recent pro-democratic policy in the form of a speech for the benefit of the Brazilian audience. In the context of the time, the speech was not simply a friendly gesture to the current government, but a warning to Vargas that he

¹⁹ Hussey, Ambassador Braden's proposed policy respecting dictatorships and disreputable governments in the other American Republics, October, 1945, Lot Files, ARA Analysis and Liaison, Box 16, folder marked Analysis and Liaison, September to November, 1945.

²⁰ Wood, *The Dismantling*, 14-131; Schoutz, *Beneath the United States*, chapter 16.

better follow through on his promise to hold fair and free elections rather than continuing himself in office—which was rumored to be the president's real intention.²¹

There were several problems with the approach of Braden and his followers however. On the level of “high policy”, a discrimination against “disreputable” governments in the hemisphere clashed with the ongoing effort to build an inter-American community of nations—an effort that was redoubled after the war with the founding of the Organization of American States (OAS) and with the American desire to lead a solid block of American votes (representing 20 of a total of 50 votes) in the United Nations. Such a community would never materialize if its “disreputable” members faced, or were threatened to face, ostracism.

A further problem was the definition of “disreputable”. As one of the detractors of Braden's policy had asked, rhetorically: “What wise man or wise group of men is going to decide which governments are reputable and which are disreputable?”. Due to their international unpopularity and cynical disregard for widely accepted norms of political behavior, men like Somoza and Trujillo were easily singled out. But there were other leaders and governments in Latin America who were not so easily classified. Particularly in those cases, the Department tended to defer policy decisions to the chief of mission in question. In effect, the execution of American policy toward hard-to-classify governments would be dependent on the idiosyncrasies of the local ambassador. As the discussion of Braden's original proposal would suggest, this led to a rather varied assortment of responses to local conditions: ranging from Berle's veiled threats against the Brazilian regime to Erwin's praise for Carías.

3. A BULL FOR EVERY CHINA SHOP?

All the disagreement and inherent problems and paradoxes of Braden's policy were present in U.S.-Central American relations after the War. The region witnessed several democratically inspired revolutions in 1944 and would witness countercoups in the future. On the face of it, therefore, the Central American situation offered a good opportunity for Washington to take a stand, which it did in the case of Somoza. However, the American ambassador in Guatemala showed only a passing interest in politics and American and Guatemalan definitions of what democracy should mean eventually became irreconcilable. In El Salvador, the ambassador basically agreed with Braden's standpoints, but the political realities in that country eluded easy definition according to the standard of “reputability” and American policy wavered. Erwin, the longest serving ambassador in Central America, refused to embrace the new policy guidelines. While he continued to observe Department instructions to the letter, his close relationship to the Carías dictatorship blunted Washington's efforts to dissociate itself from the Honduran regime.

²¹ Wood, *The Dismantling*, 121-131. Quote is on page 123.

3.1 *Friend of the Americas*

A festive, optimistic mood prevailed in Guatemala after the October revolution. The ruling junta promised fair elections and actually carried them out (the former is the usual practice for revolutionary governments; the latter is a rare occurrence). Winner of the election was Juan José Arévalo, a liberal-minded university professor who set in motion land reform and education programs which were moderate by international standards, but revolutionary in the Central American context. People in Guatemala anticipated a brighter future, a hope that was doubtlessly strengthened because the Guatemalan experiment in democratic governance seemed to be part of wider, international developments in favor of democracy—including the downfall of several longstanding tyrants in Latin America and the defeat of European Fascism and Asian militarism.

Observing the atmosphere in Guatemala, even grumpy old ambassador Long had to admit that “the unbounded enthusiasm of the young patriots is admirable”. Long entertained some reservations about the supposed lack of experience by the new rulers, noting that the “history of Guatemala is undoubtedly going to be affected by the almost complete elimination of people beyond middle age and their replacement by youngsters who run from 22 to 40 years”. At the same time, however, everyone around him was optimistic: “I...was told by many people what a marvelous blessing the new administration was”. The Mexican ambassador opined that the junta was a “dream” of good government and the American colony took the political changes in good humor—the manager of the American-owned railroad assured Long that “everything is satisfactory as far as the railroad people are concerned”. The openness and friendliness of the new rulers offered a stark contrast to the gloomy secretiveness of Ubico’s final years in office. Having attended a banquet in honor of the new Junta, Long confided to his diary that it “was quite a grand affair and completely free from all of the stilted reservations which had affected previous government parties under Ubico”.²²

The State Department, which interpreted events in Guatemala in the context of its new pro-democratic policy in Latin America, initially welcomed the revolution. Department studies presented Guatemala as an example of the “genuine” and “authentic” democratic movement that seemed to engulf Latin America.²³ Throughout the first years of the Arévalo administration, Washington’s policy of “aloofness” to the dictatorships and friendliness toward the democracies expressed itself in benign tolerance for the unsettling effects that the Guatemalan revolution had in neighboring countries. The remaining dictatorships in the isthmus complained that the new Arévalo regime was Communistic and invited the United States to join them in an anti-

²² Long, diary entries of June 1, June 2, June 3, October 27, and December 22, 1944, Long Papers, Box 66, Folder 334: Diaries and Long, diary entries of January 10, January 12, and March 16, 1945, Long Papers, Box 66, Folder 335: Diaries.

²³ Cochran to Rockefeller, n.d. (March, 1945), Lot Files, General Memoranda, Box 10, folder marked January to May, 1945; Hussey, Report on the Current Situation in the other American Republics, January 13, 1945, Lot Files, Analysis and Liaison, Box 15, folder marked December, 1944, to February, 1945; Hussey to Butler, August 23, 1946, Lot Files, Analysis and Liaison, Box 16, folder marked May to September, 1946.

Communitistic alliance against the threat. At the time, this argument did not affect thinking in Washington. A Department memorandum noted that "the definition of 'Communism' in Central America is flexible and suited to local purposes". In this case it was merely a cover, the Department recognized, for the dictatorships' hostility toward Arévalo. "Inasmuch as the Government of President Arévalo is one of the most nearly democratic that any Central American country has recently had, we should lend no support to any movement of his neighbors that may possible be hostile to him".²⁴

Another token of Washington's sympathy for the new Government in Guatemala was the appointment to that country of ambassador Edwin J. Kyle, a Texan educator and agriculturalist. If Braden, with his "bull"-like approach to diplomacy, presented one end of a spectrum, Edwin Kyle might present the other side. Known as "Dean Kyle" among admirers due to his former position as the head of the School of Agriculture at Texas A&M, ambassador Kyle was a gentle, friendly, academic type of man in his early 70's.

Considering the fact that Guatemala's first democratic president, Juan José Arévalo, was himself an educator and the fact that his administration took a keen interest in the improvement of agriculture and education, the appointment of Kyle to Guatemala was a felicitous choice. However, the new ambassador was not easily adopted into the Service itself. Political appointees were not particularly popular among the career officers and Kyle himself made a point of not being a "traditional" diplomat. The somewhat malicious gossip among Kyle's secretaries was that the trustees of Texas A&M had pushed for the Dean's nomination to an embassy because the latter was an obstacle for the trustees' choice for a new university president. Kyle's secretaries were also a bit cynical about their new chief's enthusiasm for inter-American friendship. As one of his secretaries remembered:

I found one of these little desk ornaments put out by Pan American Airlines, which had a sort of ark-like wooden base with holes for the flags of all the American republics. I had a little brass plate made to put on the base saying: To Ambassador Edwin J. Kyle, Friend of the Americas, and gave it to him. He took this quite seriously. It was really kind of a prank on my part because I was just pandering to his ego. He was very proud of this, and he put it in a prominent place on his desk as Ambassador.²⁵

One of the first tasks that Kyle had waiting for him when he arrived at his post was to give his comments on the suggested policy against dictatorships and disreputable governments. His eventual report offers a glimpse of the new ambassador's generous idealism and, consequently, a complete blind spot for cultural relativity or nuance with which his colleagues of the career rank were so liberally imbued. Kyle not only supported Braden's suggestions, but argued that the United States go further and take a firm stand against dictators. He felt that the dominant position that the United States had acquired

²⁴ Wise to Woodward, Briggs, Braden, and Acheson, April 25, 1947, Lot Files, General Memoranda, Box 13, folder marked May to June, 1947..

²⁵ Interview with Woodward, ADST. The exact wording was "His Excellency Edwin J. Kyle, Ambassador of the United States of America and friend of the American Republics".

as a result of the war justified this more assertive attitude and, as a “friend of the Americas”, he felt confident to speak for the “large majority of the best people in these countries” who, in the ambassador’s assessment, demanded such an attitude of their powerful neighbor:

In my judgment we have not fully asserted our rights which this power and this position among nations gives us. We should above all things be fair, just, and charitable to all peoples and all nations, but at the same time we should be firm and we should assert our rights which have come as the result of saving the world from ruthless dictators twice in a single generation, and thus become the greatest defender of democratic principles of all times.²⁶

Even despite Kyle’s idealism, the honeymoon between the American diplomatic establishment and the new Guatemalan government lasted only three years. After 1947, it became evident the two had different conceptions as to the meaning of democracy. In fact, Washington policymakers would come to define the Guatemalan revolution as a front for Communist infiltration and in 1954, the Eisenhower administration ordered the CIA to topple the government of Jacobo Arbenz—the successor of Arévalo and one of the original revolutionists. The breakdown of relations between the United States and Guatemala during the late 1940s has been the subject of several historical studies, due to interest in the 1954 intervention. No single factor could explain the growing animosity that American policy makers developed against Guatemala—unless the Cold War, with all its complicated causes and effects, is taken as a single factor.²⁷

Even if there had not been a Cold War, the patience of the Department might have been severely stretched because Guatemalan ambitions were at variance with the American conception of democratic governance. As different elements in above-quoted Departmental and Embassy reports indicate, American diplomats conceived of the movement towards a more democratic world as a respectable political affair in which the United States—the champion of democracy—rightly took a leading role. The Guatemalan idea of democracy was broader and more militant: It included social and economic reform and assigned to Guatemala a role as a revolutionary vanguard. In the local context, where many supposed voters were dirt-poor and illiterate and where the whole experiment was threatened by reactionary landlords and dictatorial neighbors, this could hardly be otherwise.

From the start, the Guatemalan government agitated against its dictatorial neighbors and vice versa. While the State Department initially sympathized with Guatemala’s position in the international shouting match between democrats and dictators, the conflict took on a more troublesome aspect when actual fighting broke out. Throughout the late 1940s, political exiles from all over the Caribbean area organized military campaigns against the surviving dictatorships of Somoza, Carías, and Trujillo. While the American press came to refer to the impromptu armies involved in this activity

²⁶ Hussey, Ambassador Braden’s proposed policy respecting dictatorships and disreputable governments in the other American Republics, October, 1945, Lot Files, ARA Analysis and Liaison, Box 16, folder marked Analysis and Liaison, September to November, 1945.

²⁷ See chapter 9, pages 301-305 and 325-330.

as the “Caribbean Legion”, a truly coordinated campaign against the dictatorships never materialized. Unconnected groups of “patriots, politicians, and soldiers of fortune” launched several military campaigns against the dictatorships, but none of those were very effective or successful. It was clear however, that the Arévalo government sympathized with the so-called legion and provided it with a safe-haven in Guatemala and probably with arms and planes.

The contrast between the Department's anti-dictatorial policy and that of the Arévalo administration could not be greater. Braden's proposals were confined to symbolic and diplomatic acts that would not interfere with inter-American solidarity and cooperation. The actions of the Guatemalan-backed “Legion”, while ineffectual in terms of actually spreading democracy, provoked countless international conflicts between the democracies and the dictatorships in the Caribbean. The situation caused considerable embarrassment for the State Department, because it could not mediate the conflicts without appearing to favor one side over the other. Eventually, Washington chose to employ the newly created Organization of American States as a front to investigate the Caribbean conflicts and to chide supposed perpetrators on both sides. By 1950, the crisis subsided due to the OAS' actions, the Legion's own incompetence, and a return to authoritarian politics in many Caribbean countries. But by that time the damage to U.S. Guatemalan relations had already been done: the State Department would not forgive Arévalo for putting it on the spot in the fight between the democracies and the tyrannies of the Caribbean.²⁸

Another major difference between the American and the Guatemalan conception of democracy was the question as to the social-economic implications of that political doctrine. Due to the progressive (but by no means radical) Labor Code instituted by Arévalo, relations between his government and the American-owned United Fruit company, the largest employer of the region, soured. Apart from *Ubiquistas* and other reactionary Guatemalans, UFCO was probably the first to raise the issue of Communist infiltration of the Guatemalan government. The company employed a small army of very effective lobbyist who received a sympathetic hearing, ironically, from Assistant Secretary Spruille Braden. In 1945, the latter had put a stamp of American approval on Arévalo's election by personally attending the inauguration of the Guatemalan president. But aside from being a “practical democrat”, Braden was also a former businessman with considerable assets in Latin America and, as his behavior in Argentina indicates, a vehement opponent of everything smacking of Totalitarianism—be it from the left or the right. While it would take many years for the break between Washington and Guatemala to become irreversible, UFCO's introduction of the Communist specter around 1947 was a definite step in that direction.²⁹

²⁸ On Guatemala, the United States, and the Caribbean Legion, consult: Ameringer, *The Caribbean Legion*, passim.

²⁹ Braden, Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. John L. Simpson, Mr. Tennyson (International Railways of Central America) and Mr. Pollan (Vice President, United Fruit Company), November 29, 1946, Lot Files, General Memoranda, Box 12, folder marked November 18, 1946 to January 17, 1947.

Throughout this period, Edwin Kyle managed to uphold his image in Guatemala of a respectable educator and agriculturalist. The Guatemalan government appreciated Kyle's friendly interest in these fields, which manifested itself in the form of educational exchange programs, the translation in Spanish of American books on the newest developments in agriculture, and numerous study trips of Guatemalan agricultural engineers to the United States and vice versa—all made possible by the Dean's involvement. But gentle Kyle had no interest in the international conflicts involving the Caribbean Legion and his concern for the improvement of agriculture did not include labor laws or other social matters. In his own, patronizing way, he sympathized with Guatemalan efforts to modernize its agriculture, but he also admired the enormous, well-ordered and scientifically managed plantations of UFCO.³⁰ Basically, Kyle's interest in local politics ended with his somewhat abstract defense of Guatemalan democracy in 1945. He did not play a real part in the issues surrounding the Caribbean Legion or the Labor Code—except as the Department's voice in Guatemala. If the ambassador had taken an effort to gauge Guatemala's standpoint in these matters, communication between Washington and Guatemala might have been improved. Instead, UFCO was allowed to put a definite stamp on the Department's conception of events in Guatemala. When compared to Erwin's spirited and persistent defense of Honduran authoritarianism or Braden's attacks on Argentine "totalitarianism", one cannot help but conclude that Kyle could have played a much more forceful—and perhaps positive—role in his function as American ambassador to Guatemala.

In 1945, the State Department considered it appropriate to send an agriculturist to Guatemala. In 1948—when 72 year old Kyle was definitely up for retirement—the changing mood in Washington was expressed by its decision to send one of the very first "Cold Warriors", Richard C. Patterson Jr., to Guatemala. While Patterson was also a political appointee, the attitude of an American embassy toward the local government probably never changed as much as when Patterson took over from Kyle. A former army officer and businessman, Patterson did not have the patience, gentleness, and intellectual ability that made Kyle a successful teacher and scholar. Rather, Colonel Patterson was overbearing and arrogant and tended to reduce complex issues to straightforward dichotomies.³¹ Patterson's previous assignment was to Yugoslavia, where his experience with Marshall Tito had not been a happy one. However, being the officer to have served "behind" the Iron Curtain longest (in 1947), made Patterson something of a recognized expert in Communist tactics, a role which he appears to have cherished. His transfer from Communist Yugoslavia to Guatemala was in itself a sign that the Truman administration was not pleased with the direction which Arévalo's social experiments were taking. Guatemalans of a reactionary bend were quick to pick up on that message and to seek out Patterson. General Miguel Ydígoras-Fuentes, former

³⁰ Kyle to Arnold Nicholson, Memorandum on Dean Kyle's background, Kyle Papers; Kyle to Liberty Hyde Baily, March 29, 1946, Kyle Papers.

³¹ Consider for example, Patterson's method for identifying communists, discussed in LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 116

Ubico crony and future president of Guatemala, for example, commended Patterson on his “brilliant performance in Yugoslavia” and added that the new ambassador must “know perfectly well all the tricks of International Communism”. “Indeed, yes” Patterson answered, “I feel that I know many of the tricks of international communism”. And, ominously, “my three years of experience with Marshal Tito should be helpful in my future work”.³²

3.2 Caught in the middle

Around 1941, second secretary Overton G. Ellis had an informal talk with Augustín Alfaro, a prominent Salvadoran civil engineer and a revolutionary leader in 1944. While steering clear of any concrete comment on the local regime, Alfaro discussed in general terms the failure of the constitution to clearly define the voter. Assuming that the conversation was going to continue on an abstract plane, Ellis responded with some local truisms about “the illiteracy and lack of any political education or consciousness of the masses” which made them “easy prey for any demagogue”. Betraying, perhaps for the first time, his practical interest in politics, Alfaro rebuked the secretary’s fatalism with the straightforward observation that “We learn to walk by walking”.³³

After the fall of Martínez, it was time that Salvadorans learned how to walk. Under the right circumstances they might have succeeded, but the democratic experiment that started in May was cut short by a military coup in October. It is hard to say why Salvadorans failed where Guatemalans succeeded, at least for the time being, in setting up a relatively liberal government. Granted, the Provisional President after the fall of the old regime, General Andrés Ignacio Menéndez, was a former collaborator of Martínez and had been a figurehead president on the latter’s behalf once before in 1931. However, Menendez seems to have been genuinely interested in the democratic experiment of 1944 and was doubtlessly encouraged in this by his much more forceful and liberally-minded wife who—being only 26 years old at the time—was a new arrival on the Salvadoran political scene.³⁴ In the end, it was not the many political leftovers from Martínez’ days who ended the experiment, but the Salvadoran army.

The position of the Salvadoran army after the revolution was entirely different from that of the Guatemalan army. Since Ponce was removed by the army, the power and the prestige of the Guatemalan armed forces remained intact. In fact, with two officers in the ruling junta and a new revolutionary aura, the position of the army was better than ever. In Salvador, however, the army lost much of its standing in the botched April uprising and nearly all of its political influence when the civilian element singlehandedly bested

³² Gen. Miguel Ydígoras-Fuentes to Richard S. Patterson, December 3, 1948, Patterson Papers, Box 5, folder marked Appointment; Patterson to Ydígoras-Fuentes, February 28, 1949, Patterson Papers, Box 5, folder marked Appointment.

³³ Ellis, Memorandum on Recent Revolt, April 25, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 98, Vol. XIII, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

³⁴ Ellis, Memorandum on Political and Social Opinions of Mrs. Menendez, wife of the provisional President, May 25, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Ellis, Memorandum on Political Developments, July 17, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

Martínez. So in Salvador, many army officers felt that they could only regain their standing at the expense of the revolution while their Guatemalan colleagues could flourish within the revolution.

The Salvadoran brush with democracy lasted for only four months, but was characterized by feverish activity. Some ten political parties were formed—or came out into the open—in the two months after Martínez' downfall. Some were radical, some reactionary, most centered around a charismatic leader rather than a principle, but all referred in some way or another to the democratic ideology of the War.³⁵ New newspapers were published while existing newspapers began to express editorial comments freely.³⁶ Lawyers organized themselves in a professional organization and forced the Martínez appointees from their positions in the judicial branch.³⁷ The sessions of the national legislature, still made up of *Martinistas*, were thoroughly dominated by the spontaneous—and somewhat disorderly—contributions from the public in the galleries.³⁸ While there was something of an anarchic quality to all this activity, the Salvadoran revolution also had a hero from the start: Arturo Romero. Romero was a young physician who was one of the early leaders of the anti-Martínez movement. He came to personify the revolution much like Arévalo would in Guatemala—partly, perhaps, because the dramatic scar of a machete blow to the face served as a constant reminder of his personal sacrifices during the uprising. Judging from the information in the archives of

³⁵ This trend is noticable in the names of the new parties, which stressed democracy and solidarity: *Unión Democrática Nacional*, *Partido Emancipación Nacional*, *Frente Popular Salvadoreño*, *Partido Unión Demócrata*, *Partido del Pueblo Salvadoreño*, *Frente Social Republicano*, *Partido Fraternal Progresista*, and *Partido Unificación Social Democrática*. Not all parties were as progressive as their names suggested: *Partido Fraternal Progresista*, for example, was led by an old caudillo while *Partido Unificación Social Democrática* represented conservative coffee interests. It is indicative of the prestige of democratic principles that even the old coffee barons felt obliged to acknowledge it in the name of their party. Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1628, May 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1644, May 29, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1648, May 29, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1658, May 31, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1662, June 2, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1687, June 5, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gerhard Gade (U.S. Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1753, June 22, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1756, June 24, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

³⁶ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1557, May 12, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1576, May 17, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

³⁷ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1663, June 2, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

³⁸ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1610, May 22, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1736, June 17, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1772, June 29, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

the American embassy, there was a good chance that the disfigured young doctor would be elected president had the planned elections taken place.³⁹

The American embassy was clearly impressed by the optimism prevailing in San Salvador throughout May and June. Although it was sometimes regretted that the young revolutionaries lacked a sense of decorum, the American diplomats also recounted, with barely suppressed glee, how Martínez' old cronies in the legislature were cowed into submission by enthusiastic crowds in the galleries, or herded into the front row of a celebratory parade and "made to like it".⁴⁰ Thurston also seems to have been sympathetic to Romero, although the embassy's secretaries, who were of comparable age and social background, were even more impressed with the doctor. One of Romero's first acts as a politician was to visit the American embassy to profess his pro-Americanism and distaste of the radical factions in the revolution. The young man also appears to have been under the impression that the embassy had played an important role in Martínez' downfall and was very grateful for that.⁴¹ Toward the end of May, the embassy furnished a visa to Romero so that he could undergo plastic surgery at the famed Mayo clinic and study the social laws of the United States. Around the same time, secretary Ellis reported that Romero was pro-democratic, pro-American, and pro-capitalist and added that the doctor was one of the few who would be able to unite all classes in El Salvador.⁴² The embassy's bias for Romero was apparently so strong that it became public knowledge and Thurston felt it necessary to inform the government in August that the United States did not, in fact, prefer any candidate for the presidency over another.⁴³

Although the army kept a low profile for a while and the younger officers actually showed some careful support for the Romero campaign, the older officers who had made their careers under the Martínez regime began to stir by late June. Increased rumors about communist agitators which were followed, ironically, by bloody riots induced by reactionary agitators set the tone for the month of August.⁴⁴ It seems likely that these latest "communist uprisings" were the work of the local chief of police, colonel

³⁹ Ellis, Memorandum on Support of Augustín Alfaro for the presidential candidacy of Dr. Arturo Romero, May 25, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Ellis, Memorandum on Political Developments, July 17, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Ellis, Memorandum on Politics, July 19, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴⁰ Gade to the Secretary of State, despatch 1772, June 29, 1944, , PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴¹ Maleady, Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Arturo Romero, May 17, 1944, , PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴² Ellis, Memorandum on Support of Augustín Alfaro for the Presidential Candidacy of Dr. Arturo Romero, May 25, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1629, May 26, 1944, , PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴³ Thurston, Memorandum starting with: "I told the Minister...", August 30, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴⁴ Thurston to the Secretary of State, Telegram 259, August 4, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1927, August 21, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

Osmín Aguirre (y) Salinas.⁴⁵ The chief was a leftover from the Martínez days who, according to the embassy, was pro-Nazi and anti-American—"the prototype of the Indian militarist steeped in the old Central American traditions of the right of the military cast to rule".⁴⁶ Rumor had it that Aguirre had led a platoon of machine gunners during the *Matanza* and during the 1944 uprisings he had apparently counseled Martínez to break up the strikes with the help of Indian fighters and then shoot the Indians as communists.⁴⁷

On October 21, secretary Maleady of the embassy was at the police station to interview Aguirre about recent shootings throughout the city when a group of army officers barged into the office and, not having noticed the American, bowed very low to Aguirre and said: "Ya está, mi Coronel, ya está arreglado el asunto".⁴⁸ Somewhat embarrassed, the chief shooed the officers out of his office and proceeded to inform a now very skeptical Maleady about the utter incapability of the Menendez government to establish order. As it turned out, the military men had come to tell Aguirre that they had forced Menendez resign and the Congress to appoint the police chief president. All of this had been done, of course, to save the country from communistic agents.⁴⁹

It so happened that the embassy was without an ambassador during the military coup. Thurston was transferred some two weeks earlier. The young secretaries at the legation decided after the coup not to see Aguirre or to take any other action that might imply recognition of his regime, which they considered reactionary to the point of being Fascist inspired. Only five days later, while the political situation had not yet stabilized, the new ambassador, John Farr Simmons arrived at his new post. The State Department could have decided to delay the arrival of the new ambassador to demonstrate its lack of sympathy for the coup or at least until the local situation had straightened out, but it was apparently deemed more appropriate to have a senior officer assess the situation. Non-recognition, which was officially abandoned in the 1930s, was considered strong medicine, not to be applied carelessly. However, after just a few hours at his new post Simmons decided not to present his credentials or to talk to any government official, "pending instructions from the Department". As the Department was slow to act, the "policy" that was initiated by the secretaries of the embassy on October 21 remained in force. Explaining his decision, Simmons reported that:

...the present crisis in El Salvador has a significance far greater than the confines of this country, or even Central America. Here we have a growing

⁴⁵ The insert "y" usually denotes a noble lineage and it is much used when referring to Osmín Aguirre. It would appear however, that the Colonel was known simply as Osmín Aguirre Salinas before he became president.

⁴⁶ Ellis, Memorandum on Colonel Aguirre Salina, Chief of Police, September 9, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2097, October 23, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴⁷ Maleady, Memorandum starting with "An informant, whose reliability...", October 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁴⁸ "Already, my Colonel, already the matter has been settled".

⁴⁹ Maleady, Memorandum starting with "This memo is presented...", October 23, 1944, , PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

liberal movement among an increasingly enlightened and articulate people. This movement had, earlier this year, made orderly and decent progress. Free and fair elections for January 1945 had been guaranteed. Suddenly this progressive tendency has been cut short by violent methods. The eyes of other countries and people are directed on what action the United States may now take towards recognition of the new regime. I believe that we should take very careful thought before giving encouragement to a forcible and apparently illegal assertion and assumption of power such as has taken place in El Salvador. I believe that our action in this matter will be a pattern, and perhaps an inspiration, to the decent and moderate liberals throughout the world.⁵⁰

The next couple of weeks the situation in El Salvador remained in the balance. The Aguirre regime, while originating from an army/police coup, did not have full support from all army factions. Being made up of officers from the middle ranks (captain to colonel), the regime faced opposition from the more liberal younger officers on one side and the more reactionary general officers on the other. At the same time, the middle sectors of the capital, those who had removed Martínez, refused to submit to the new military regime. No week went by without a strike against the government, although the movement did not regain the strength on which it had ousted Martínez: Strike funds were depleted and, with the coffee picking season at hand, the upper classes no longer smiled upon disruptions in the labor and financial markets. The liberal opposition suffered a major defeat in December: restless *Romeristas* who had fled to Guatemala after the coup staged an ill-planned military invasion which was quickly routed by the Salvadoran army—thus eliminating the most militant wing of the opposition and prompting Romero to retire the leadership of his exiled party.⁵¹

Although Aguirre managed to stay in power in the face of civilian and army opposition, this appears to have been due to the weakness and dividedness of his opponents, rather than the innate strength of his own government. A most worrisome development—or lack of development—in this context was the complete silence of the United States. While the State Department did not formally distance itself from the Aguirre coup, it did not formally acknowledge its existence either. Simmons was careful not meet or associate with anyone in the Aguirre faction. In November 1944, Berle had informed the embassy that although it was not the function of the U.S. government to

⁵⁰ Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2107, October 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, vol. XIV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁵¹ Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2128, November 1, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2163, November 10, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2205, November 21, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2247, December 7, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2251, December 10, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2272, December 18, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2288, December 22, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2292, December 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

spread democracy, it “naturally” felt greater sympathy for such government. This line of policy, even if it was very vague, probably encouraged Simmons to maintain the embassy’s distance from the new regime. His reports on the insecure position of Aguirre and his supposed Nazi sympathies—while not constituting valid reasons to break diplomatic relations according to international law—probably convinced the Department to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Throughout the last quarter of 1944, and first months of 1945, the Department claimed that it was “consulting” with the other American republics on the question of recognition for the Aguirre government.⁵²

In the early 1930s, Martínez held out in the face of U.S. non-recognition for two years, but he enjoyed full army support at the time and, especially after the *Matanza*, ruled over a cowed population. Since Aguirre faced at least passive resistance from all layers of the population, lack of U.S. recognition was a much bigger problem for him and he decided not to follow in Martínez’ footsteps. In November, the Aguirre government announced that free and fair elections for the presidency would be held in January, 1945. Undoubtedly, the object was to have a puppet president elected, but the very slim basis of support that the regime enjoyed, combined with the need to find a candidate who could placate moderate Liberals as well as the State Department, disqualified any candidate from among Aguirre’s immediate retinue. After much searching, the regime decided to back the candidature of Salvador Castañeda Castro, a moderately conservative army officer and one time Minister of the Interior under Martínez. Castañeda seemed both pliable and able to garner the support of the important coffee planting interests, while he was unobjectionable for moderate Liberals who longed for peace and quiet after the upheavals of 1944.⁵³

With the help of Aguirre’s army supporters and the conservative coffee planting association (and probably some creative redacting of voting results) Castañeda managed to garner a landslide victory. No one had expected the outcome to be different because the *Romeristas* boycotted the elections while the only two remaining candidates, both of the caudillo type, dropped out of the race right before the elections to protest supposed fraud. Probably to Aguirre’s considerable dismay, however, Castañeda turned out to be his own man. Even before all the votes were counted, Castañeda broke with Aguirre over a dispute concerning the selection of future cabinet members. Aguirre naturally wanted to fill the cabinet with his own appointees, but Castañeda was bent on “national conciliation”, his campaigning theme, and wanted to reunite the country by

⁵² Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2150, November 7, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2205, November 21, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2211, November 24, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Stettinius to Simmons, Telegram 318, November 28, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Berle to Gade, Instruction 701, November 1, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 9, cl. 710: Political Relations. Treaties.

⁵³ R. Arrieta Rossi (Salvadoran Minister of Foreign Affairs), Radiogram to the American Governments, November 29, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2292, December 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 99, Vol. XV, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

inviting both Liberals and Conservatives to join his government. Over the next couple of weeks, the time remaining before the official inauguration of the new government on March 1, Aguirre and Castañeda were locked in a power struggle that would determine who was to be the real leader of El Salvador.⁵⁴

The embassy followed that power struggle with great interest. Even if Castañeda's election was not of the democratic type, his program of conciliation, if practiced conscientiously, would put Salvador back on track toward a more open and Liberal society. Considering the fact that Aguirre was a *Matanza* veteran and a former Nazi-sympathizer, he fell squarely in the "disreputable" category. The power struggle between him and Castañeda thus presented a good context for action under the purportedly pro-democratic policy of Washington. Considerations of "inter-American solidarity" took precedence, however: A conference of American Foreign Ministers was to take place in Mexico in March and the U.S. State Department wished all nations of the hemisphere to be represented there. The official invitation could not be extended to El Salvador, however, as long as its government remained unrecognized. Washington felt that it could not wait until March 1, the inauguration of Castañeda, with the invitation and was therefore considering to extend recognition to Aguirre—reasoning that it was a "lame duck" government anyway.⁵⁵ Simmons vehemently opposed the idea. Arguing that recognition would "give Aguirre a tremendous prestige just at the moment of his waning power (...) would encourage him to take some extreme political action", the ambassador further noted that:

It is also believed significant that comment among liberal circles in this country indicate that many liberal groups would understand it perfectly if we were to extend our recognition to Castaneda after March 1, realizing that the withholding of recognition cannot be continued indefinitely and that every opportunity has been given to the opposition to assert itself over a period of

⁵⁴ Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2347, January 16, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2324, January 4, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2331, January 8, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2335, January 9, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2355, January 19, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2406, February 7, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2347, January 16, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2412, February 9, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2423, February 15, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 35, March 7, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 42, March 10, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 45, March 10, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁵⁵ Cabot to Messersmith, December 21, 1944, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947; Messersmith, Memorandum on Telephone Conversation with Toriello, February 14, 1945, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947.

several months. Liberal opinion, however, would be profoundly shocked in this country were we to extend recognition to the Aguirre regime prior to March 1.⁵⁶

It is obvious then, that American recognition of Aguirre would have a significant symbolic importance in El Salvador. The State Department felt, however, that a practical solution to the problem could be found. First of all, some way was found to pressure Aguirre into letting Castañeda select the delegates to the conference. Next, the Department tried to get Guatemala on board for its plan to recognize the Salvadoran government in February. Since the Guatemalan revolutionary regime enjoyed enormous prestige with liberals in Salvador, its participation would indicate that diplomatic recognition of Aguirre did not imply approval of his regime.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, and to the considerable annoyance of the Department, the Guatemalan government flatly rejected to recognize Aguirre together with the United States. It even turned out to be difficult to get the Guatemalans to attend the conference at all, since its delegates were unwilling to negotiate with Salvadoran representatives who, while informally selected by Castañeda, would bear letters of credence signed by Aguirre. In the end, the Department decided that the Guatemalans “confused” the matter of recognition and the conference with ideological matters, while the real issue was a “common front” during the war. The new leaders of Guatemala were, after all, “young, inexperienced and idealistic”. In the end, Washington recognized the Salvadoran government on February 19. Guatemala followed suit only when it considered that Castañeda had validated his rhetorical commitment to conciliation—almost two months later.⁵⁸

The fact that Salvadoran delegation to Mexico was made up of Castañeda’s men seems not to have made a big impression on Salvadoran public opinion. The fact that the United States recognized Aguirre, while liberal neighbors such as Guatemala did not, made a more profound impact. In the days and weeks after recognition, the embassy in San Salvador received hate mail in such quantities that a separate file marked “protests against recognition” was created in the archives. Many letters accused the United States of fascist policies; some contained more traditional denunciations of “Yankee imperialism”; at least one letter was accompanied by a picture of Franklin Roosevelt adorned with swastikas.⁵⁹ While the fact that the Salvadoran opposition, as an organized body, never regained its old strength must have played a role in the development, it is noteworthy to observe that throughout the following years there was very little contact between the American embassy and oppositionists.

⁵⁶ Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2362, January 25, 1945, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 11, Vol. II, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁵⁷ John F. Simmons (U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 76, March 22, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 241, May 19, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁵⁸ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 126, April 11, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

⁵⁹ PR El Salvador, Box 119, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador. Protest against Recognition.

Eventually, the recognition of Aguirre had no lasting impact on political power struggle *inside* El Salvador and Castañeda was duly inaugurated on March 1. Simmons was initially optimistic about Castañeda's promises about national conciliation. While the President was not elected by fair means, at least he had been elected, the ambassador opined, and if Castañeda followed up on his pledge to invite liberal civilians into the government and to extend a general amnesty for those driven into exile by Aguirre, El Salvador might yet take some careful steps in the direction of more democracy.⁶⁰

That this was not to be was due in part to the extreme polarization of Salvadoran politics. Like a classic zero-sum game, every concession that Castañeda did to the liberal civilians was considered a defeat by the army and the conservatives and vice versa. Thus, in Simmons' conception of the situation, Castañeda tried to please everyone but ended up pleasing no-one. Conservatives were concerned that the most important members of the Aguirre cabinet were left out of the government and that Castañeda sought a rapprochement with the Arévalo government. Liberals were disappointed that none of their leaders were invited into the new government and that, despite an amnesty decree, Castañeda refused to allow supposed Communists back into the country. Both factions came to interpret conciliatory moves made by the President as concessions wrung from a weak government, rather than grand gestures made by a strong one. On the one hand, the Liberal press forced Castañeda, after a very bitter newspaper campaign, to adopt the popular constitution of 1886. On the other hand, minor plots from both sides forced Castañeda to rely more and more on army and police support and to rule under a state of siege for much of his time in office.⁶¹

Thus Simmons found himself in a considerably more ambiguous situation than his colleagues in neighboring countries. While Guatemala could be considered a real democracy—especially in comparison with the previous regime and when seen through the eyes of an ambassador as charitable as Kyle—and while Honduras was still under the control of a 1930s caudillo, the new regime in El Salvador eluded definition. With the advantage of hindsight, historians regard the government of General Castaneda as an integral part of the military and often authoritarian rule that characterized Salvadoran politics between the early 1930s and the middle 1980s. But Simmons lacked the broad

⁶⁰ Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2423, February 15, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 54, March 14, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2362, January 25, 1945, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 11, Vol. II, cl. 800: El Salvador.

⁶¹ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 93, March 28, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 279, June 1, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the American Embassies in Central America, June 11, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 304, June 13, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 385, August 8, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 423, August 29, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: Salvador. General; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 379, July 30, 1945, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 11, Vol. II, cl. 800: Salvador; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 577, November 30, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 119, Vol. XVII, cl. 801.1: Constitution.

view that hindsight offers and, more importantly, did not know in which direction the government in particular or the political climate more generally would develop. Thus, for the ambassador in San Salvador, the policy against dictatorships raised the very basic question as to “the type of government which exists in this country”:

[T]here is at least the question as to whether the present government of President Castaneda should or should not be classed as a dictatorship. Certain aspects of the Castaneda government might support the thesis that he is not a dictator and that he should be considered as a President elected by due constitutional processes and legally functioning as the chief of state of a democracy.

On the other hand, the ambassador argued, Castañeda’s election was due only to the support of Aguirre and the army. Summarizing several other characteristics of the government, Simmons could not offer a real conclusion as to what type of government he was dealing with. And although he agreed with most of Braden’s points, he studiously avoided any mention of how they would affect relations with El Salvador.

Simmons did betray some optimism about Castaneda’s conciliation policy. Even though it was discouraging that the army had great influence over the president, the ambassador believed that the army itself was divided and this might offer Castaneda a change to involve the Liberal opposition in his government. The ambassador still considered that last group of “forward-looking liberals, small in number but strongly influenced by Jeffersonian concepts of democracy”, to be the best hope for Salvador’s future. It was fortunate that the Liberals in El Salvador were “more articulate” than in any other Central American countries and that they patterned their “ideals upon the democratic processes of our country”. However, their “liking and respect for the United States [suffered] a severe setback at the time of our recognition of the Aguirre regime on February 19, 1945, nine days before President’s Castaneda’s inauguration”. If the United States was serious about its intention to encourage a development towards more democracy, Simmons argued, the Liberal element in El Salvador “should be given every encouragement [because] in the long run, [it] is our greatest hope for the future in the gradual establishment in this country of what we understand as the democratic process”.

As to how this last objective should be accomplished, Simmons offered no concrete ideas. He regretted to admit that:

A justified criticism of our diplomatic service in the past [years], and even in a limited way at present, is the tendency often shown by our diplomats to limit their association and contacts to a certain international set or certain types of individuals whom they consider to possess known influence and importance. This tendency has in the past often prevented the development of the wide contacts, so necessary in this modern age, between our representatives and the representatives of all phases of the economic and cultural life of the country concerned. It has too often be the case in the past that the liberal and progressive elements in the country (...) have failed to gain contact with out representatives and that the latter have thus tended to obtain a distorted picture of the whole life of the country.

But while Simmons expressed his devout hope that this situation would change in the future, his only contribution to the realization of that ambition was to suggest that “the Department may find it possible to draft a policy instruction along these lines”⁶²

In terms of long term policy, Simmons advised the Department to limit arms deliveries to Salvador because the army was a “bulwark of the non-progressive and reactionary elements here”. Also, the United States should make sure that El Salvador always employed an American military officer to direct its military school so that the latter could “indoctrinate the cadets with the democratic character of our military tactics”. On the issue of U.S. aid programs in the country, Simmons saw great opportunities for a literacy program: “From the point of view of gradual democratic development this illiteracy problem is virtually the whole problem”.⁶³

In terms of short term policy, the ambassador remained unsure how he might entice the liberal classes in El Salvador to play a bigger role in future political developments. There is no evidence to suggest that he improved his network of personal contacts. In fact, his reports over the next few months suggest that, in the face of growing army influence, the active Liberal opposition went underground and the ambassador lost touch with it. He also began to lose confidence in Castaneda who, despite his continued rhetorical dedication to “conciliation”, became entirely dependent on the support of the conservative Generals to ward off coups by younger officers and to suppress food riots and increasingly militant labor protests against the government’s meandering social policies. The plunging morale of Castaneda’s government also manifested itself in increased cynicism, petty intrigues, and graft. This situation took on such extreme forms that Simmons eventually decided to advise against extending more aid or loans to El Salvador, despite the promises of such aid for the country’s future development.⁶⁴

A crisis occurred in September 1946, when a general strike broke out in San Salvador and steadily gained momentum throughout the month. The reason for this development was the Government’s procrastination in the institution of promised labor laws. Some months earlier, the administration had created the new cabinet position of Minister of Labor, but subsequently neglected to appoint someone to that post. Also, a committee of “outstanding citizens” had been working on a new and badly needed Labor Code for some time, but in the end, the President rejected the committee’s proposals

⁶² Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 349, July 9, 1945, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 11, Vol. I, cl. 710: Political Relations.

⁶³ Simmons to Hull, April 30, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 13, Vol. I, cl. 710: Political Relations. Treaties.

⁶⁴ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 744, March 2, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1051, September 18, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1063, September 25, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1065, September 27, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1095, October 11, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 131, Vol. XVIII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1582, June 9, 1947, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 14, cl. 800: Salvador. General.

without apparent reason. These actions alienated both labor and middle class liberals who initially joined forces in the September strike. The situation got out of control, however, when the police fired randomly at a peaceful student demonstration—killing four and wounding twenty, some of whom were innocent bystanders. In response, the strike turned violent as its moderate supporters were scared away by police brutality and only the militant participants remained. While the Castañeda government had initially been paralyzed by the opposing demands of Liberals and Conservatives, who respectively demanded surrender to and suppression of the strike, it now turned to the army. Martial law was decreed on September 24, allowing the police and the army to break up the strike—an objective that was accomplished some three days later. As a consequence, real power in El Salvador was now definitely in the hands of senior army officers responsible for the suppression of the strike, although the civilian government of Castañeda was allowed to remain as a front.⁶⁵

In the absence of a concrete context for action—even the hope for slow progress through American aid became dim due to increasing government corruption—Simmons became disillusioned with political situation in El Salvador over the course of his tenure in that country. Summarizing Castañeda's accomplishments toward the end of 1946, Simmons reported that the former's position was now more stable than ever. However, this did not imply that he was good presidential material. His term of office was characterized by a "policy of expediency and undignified compromise". The ambassador opined that Castañeda's "political surrender" to a faction of senior army officers that was only concerned with its own political ambitions was "almost pathetic". Attempts at conciliation were completely abandoned under army pressure and the administration was now "settling down into the more usual Central American patterns of the past".⁶⁶

Simmons' disillusionment now also extended to the Liberals who in the past had demonstrated, the ambassador believed, a complete lack of willingness to comprise with Castañeda's conciliation policy and were distressingly apathetic about the abuses of the government. In October, 1945, for example, a cabinet crisis had offered an opening for president Castañeda to invite more Liberals into his government. And while the president did extend an invitation to several men from this group, they had refused to join the government unless the popular and liberal constitution of 1886 was reinstated—something that Castañeda was unable or unwilling to do at that particular time. Simmons

⁶⁵ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1051, September 18, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1058, September 23, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to certain embassies, Telegram 202, September 25, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1063, September 25, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-222, September 27, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1065, September 27, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador; Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1070, September 30, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 130, Vol. XVII, cl. 800: Salvador.

⁶⁶ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1195, November 27, 1946, PR El Salvador, Box 131, Vol. XVIII, cl. 800: Salvador.

chided the Liberals for foregoing this “golden opportunity” to increase their influence and work towards a “greater degree of democracy and popular participation”.⁶⁷

Beginning in 1947, the Department of State acknowledged that Simmons’ “recent fear that the Castaneda Government was drifting toward the usual pattern of Central American military dictatorship” had become a reality. Recent elections for the National Assembly, executed under the state of siege that had been in effect since the strike of 1946, represented a “new low” in Salvadoran politics. The Government had not even bothered to “go through the motions” of democratic procedure and many voters did not know that elections had taken place until the results were published. In February, the embassy reported that the administration of El Salvador “has reached an all-time low for corruption, cynicism and venality; that the cabinet is weak; [and] that the government has ceased to govern”. Finally, the government of Castañeda, which had eluded definition two years earlier, could be classified: “It surely is not the democratic government that one had hoped it would be in the early stages”.⁶⁸

3.3 *Utopia Inc.*

John Erwin would serve a total of 13 years, divided over two tours of 10 and 3 years respectively, in Honduras—an unusual length of time, as the average was 3 to 4 years. A political appointee and former journalist, Erwin initially attacked the widespread government corruption he encountered in Honduras in the muckraking tradition that earned him some modest fame during his previous career.⁶⁹ Throughout the War, however, Erwin developed a very close working relationship with the Carías regime and, as his years of residence in Tegucigalpa accumulated, the ambassador settled in for a more comfortable life and assumed the complacent attitude of an American retiree in a tropical country. From the early 1940s onward, Erwin began to refer to Tegucigalpa affectionately as “our town” and adopted the perspective of foreign businessmen with long residence in Honduras who appreciated the years of peace and calm Carías had provided them:

Honduras is really a wonderful country and (...) it is a pity that it is not more appreciated: no volcanoes, no earthquakes, no tornadoes, no army, no navy, no revolutions, no elections, no Communists, no labor unions, no wage or social security laws, no income tax, no doubt about who is boss!⁷⁰

Neither the Department nor the Administration showed an interest in replacing Erwin: Career officers had no interest in a post as dull as Tegucigalpa and traditionally

⁶⁷ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 502, October 10, 1945, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 11, Vol. II, cl. 800: Salvador.

⁶⁸ Simmons to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1292, January 17, 1947, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 14, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Williams to Newbegin, December 31, 1946, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947; Williams to Wise and Newbegin, January 23, 1947, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947; Williams to Newbegin, January 28, 1947, Lot Files, Individual Countries, Box 46, folder marked El Salvador, 1940-1947.

⁶⁹ See chapter 1, pages 47-48.

⁷⁰ Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1442, November 2, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras, August to December.

regarded appointment to that country as punishment duty. The Truman administration never took an acute interest in the region and could not very well fool its political appointees into thinking that the Central American backwater was somehow an important or interesting area—as was the case at the height of the Good Neighbor policy when Erwin was appointed. But while the top of the executive branch had no problem with Erwin's loitering in Tegucigalpa, his colleagues of the career rank in the middle positions of the Department and Service were thoroughly fed up with him around the end of the war. Officers at the American embassy in San Salvador cynically referred to Erwin's post as "Utopia Inc." and the Central American desk officer in Washington complained to Spruille Braden about the "rather nauseating 'Carias can do no wrong' attitude of Tegucigalpa".⁷¹

If even his colleagues were losing their patience with Erwin, it should come as no surprise that the Central American Liberal factions regarded him as a dupe of the local regime. Erwin's refusal to meet oppositionists or even to accept their written manifestos gave cause to gossip that he was on Carias' payroll. It was widely believed that Erwin never fully informed Franklin Roosevelt—who was still regarded as a foremost champion of democracy—about the reality of Carias' tyrannical rule. When it was rumored in late 1944 that Roosevelt found out about Erwin's duplicity and decided to withdraw the ambassador, people in Tegucigalpa flocked to the churches to give thanks to God.⁷² They would be disappointed: Erwin was not even halfway through his tenure as ambassador to Honduras.

With Erwin remaining in his utopian "Shangri-La"⁷³ and Braden in charge of Latin American affairs in Washington, policy toward Honduras developed a character that could only be described as schizophrenic.

Even before Braden came in, the Department was purposefully negligent of Carias. Throughout 1945 at least, Central American revolutionaries of all nationalities were roaming the isthmus and, flush with the successes experienced by the anti-dictatorial movements in Salvador and Guatemala, were busily planning (and sometimes executing) armed expeditions against the remaining tyrants. Some members of this "Caribbean Legion" found refuge in Guatemala where the Government was sympathetic to their cause; weapons could be obtained relatively easily; and hideouts in the rugged terrain along the Honduran border were plentiful. Since some armed excursions from Guatemalan territory into Honduras did materialize in 1945, Carias complained loudly

⁷¹ Simmons to Briggs, March 13, 1946, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 13, Vol. I, cl. 020: Publications; Newbegin to Braden, August 12, 1946, Lot Files, Miscellaneous Memoranda, Box 64, folder marked Neutrality, September 21, 1938 to August 14, 1940.

⁷² Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1229, July 27, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 100, cl. 800: Honduras; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-290, August 19, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 100, cl. 800: Honduras; The U.S. Legal Attaché to El Salvador to the Secretary of State, September 13, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 100, cl. 800: Honduras. The latter claim was made by an unidentified informant of the legal attaché at the U.S. embassy in San Salvador and it seems likely that it is at least an exaggeration.

⁷³ One of secretary Faust's favorite terms to describe Honduras. Faust to William P. Cochran, Jr. (Department of State), January 21, 1946, PR Honduras, Box 147, cl. 801.1: Constitution.

that his northern neighbor was neglectful of its international duties and told Erwin more discreetly that the military campaigns against him were actually coordinated by the Guatemalan government, which was itself a proxy of Mexican communism. Although Carías' fabrications did not illicit much interest from the Americans in the political environment of 1945, Erwin did take Carías' side in reporting to Washington that the caudillo only wanted to be left in peace and that the Guatemalans should get a firm dressing down from Washington for their failure to prevent revolutionary activity against friendly governments. Since Kyle reported from Guatemala City that the Arévalo government only wanted to be left in peace and that the Hondurans should get a firm dressing down from Washington because of the malignant rumors they were spreading about a friendly government, the Department could let its own sympathies decide the matter. As the general attitude of the division of American Republic Affairs was to go easy on the democracies and to be demanding of the dictatorships, Carías' complaints were ignored while Washington was uncharacteristically tolerant of the disorderly situation along Guatemala's borders. The Department's attitude in the matter may have inspired Carías to seek a rapprochement with his neighbor, which he did by declaring his support for Guatemala's territorial claims on British Honduras (Belize) toward the end of 1945, effectively ending the friction between the two country's, for the time being.⁷⁴

It was prudent of Carías to keep a low profile in international matters, because the Department's attitude toward him cooled down further in the next two years or so. Despite the fact that Carías was traditionally considered the most "benign" of the four original isthmian caudillos, Braden's formula of cool politeness but no aid for "disreputable" governments was applied to him as well—perhaps *because* the Honduran president was always mentioned in one breath with the more tyrannical regimes of Ubico, Martínez, and Somoza. In any event, the Honduran ambassador to Washington, Dr. Julián Cáceres, found that his job became very difficult with Braden in charge of Latin American affairs. The bone of contention during the next two years was the status of U.S.-Honduran military cooperation. In Braden's conception of the policy toward disreputable governments, the delivery of military materiel to dictatorships or unstable

⁷⁴ Erwin to Cabot, January 11, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: General. Central American Relations; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1589, January 11, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: General. Central American Relations; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1591, January 12, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: General. Central American Relations; Robert F. Woodward (U.S. Secretary of Embassy to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 96, May 29, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-148, June 14, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase 192, October 12, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Kyle to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase 193, October 13, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase 199, October 15, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Kyle to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase 200, October 16, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase 202, October 20, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala; Kyle to the Secretary of State, Despatch 815, November 9, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 26, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Guatemala.

governments was decidedly out of the question. Since Carías was a dictator, he was not to benefit from the stream of surplus weapons going to Latin America after the War. Other countries that were barred from such deliveries were Argentina, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Paraguay. In the case of Honduras, the policy was first applied, discreetly, toward the end of 1945, beginning of 1946, when the Department tied up in red tape the delivery of military type airplanes to Honduras. When the Honduran government approached Canada for the delivery of airplanes, the Department also managed to prevent that sale.⁷⁵

For the better part of a year, the Department maintained a very dubious attitude toward Honduras, however. Perhaps because of Carías' very low profile, as opposed to that of the megalomaniacal president of the Dominican Republic, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo, the Department did not come out to declare outright its disapproval for the Honduran regime. In March 1946, Byrnes informed the embassy in Tegucigalpa, again discreetly, that Carías was not to receive a birthday greeting that year and that the embassy itself should be careful not to show undue regard for the local regime.⁷⁶ Two months earlier, when the Honduran ambassador visited the Department to explain that Honduras was a democracy, but of a "different nature" than Americans might be accustomed to, he was told that the "only way to learn democracy was to practice it". And although the Department expressed its satisfaction at Carías' intention to leave the presidency in 1948, it did not directly inform the Hondurans that special restrictions on weapons deliveries applied in the meantime.⁷⁷ Only toward the end of 1946, as the Honduran ambassador in Washington became particularly insistent that the delivery of military airplanes to his country should be expedited, did Braden tell Cáceres directly that:

...this Government [has] a more friendly feeling and a greater desire to cooperate with those Governments which [are] based on the periodically and freely expressed will of the people (...) There had been no such elections in Honduras since 1933 and (...) this fact influenced our approach to the question of military cooperation.⁷⁸

It is doubtful that this carefully worded message ever reached Carías, as the Honduran ambassador later admitted that he "had not been able to inform his government in writing of this conversation (...) because of its delicate nature".⁷⁹ Fearful of losing his plush job in Washington, Cáceres probably decided to tell his chief that the delay in weapons

⁷⁵ Braden, Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Don Julián R. Cáceres, Ambassador of Honduras, August 13, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 31, Vol. 3, cl. 800: Honduras; Lt. Col. Nathan A. Brown, Jr. (U.S. Military Attaché to Guatemala) to the American Embassy in Guatemala, January 16, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 33, Vol. 6, cl. 824: Equipment and Supplies.

⁷⁶ Byrnes to Erwin, Paraphrase of Telegram received from the Department, March 14, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 32, Vol. 5, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

⁷⁷ Cochran, Memorandum of Conversation with Cáceres, January 4, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 31, Vol. 3, cl. 800: Honduras.

⁷⁸ Briggs, Memorandum of Conversation with Cáceres, December 26, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 32, Vol. 5, cl. 820: Military Affairs.

⁷⁹ Newbegin, Memorandum of Conversation with Cáceres, October 24, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. 5, cl. 800: Honduras.

deliveries was due to administrative complications, rather than American disapproval of his regime.

Meanwhile, Erwin did an even better job of obscuring U.S. policy and of representing the peculiar nature of “democracy” in Honduras than Cáceres did. Given the number of years available to the ambassador to study the question, he managed to develop a thorough and sophisticated justification for authoritarian rule in Honduras which combined the best features of the local variation of Comte’s Positivism (but purged from the Specerian notions of race with which upper class Hondurans had enriched it) and American anthropological notions of “national character”. When secretary John B. Faust, who was something of amateur historian, joined the embassy in 1942, Erwin’s reports on the local dictatorship were augmented with a historical perspective which gave his ideas a breath and depth comparable to later modernity theory:

Recorded history has few examples of democracy developing directly from chaos; the usual sequence has been chaos, strong-man dictatorship, and then a gradual softening towards democracy. Since President Carias is at least moving in the same direction, and as nothing better is in sight, I would be derelict in my duty if I did not suggest that the Department reconsider the view [that the Carías regime is disreputable]. President Carias is a great and patriotic Honduran, entirely without ambitions beyond his own frontiers. He deserves more sympathy than has been given him up to now.⁸⁰

Though it is impossible to discuss the full corpus that the embassy in Tegucigalpa produced on this subject, some of the more significant points might profitably be quoted. The embassy’s basic argument was that chaos reigned before Carías and would return if the General stepped down. Therefore, the choice in Honduras was not one between dictatorship and democracy, but one between dictatorship and chaos. In this light, the embassy alleged, Carías’ practice of arresting and jailing oppositionists without recourse to the law was an improvement on the situation existing before 1931, when local caudillos could freely plunder the countryside. Surely, during those bygone days many more Hondurans had their “human rights” violated by the rebel leaders and chieftains who were now subdued by Carías. Furthermore, there was no record of Carías ever executing or torturing his opponents, generally allowing them to go into exile after short jail terms. And Washington should not imagine that those political prisoners who were now in jail were “snowy-white devotees of liberty and democracy”. Many of them (or at least the two examples out of 600 political prisoners that the embassy came up with) were former warlords who had committed many outrages during the civil wars of the 1920s. That they were now in jail for crimes of which they were “possibly” not guilty was beside the point, as they should have been punished for their earlier crimes a long time ago.

On the plus side, the embassy noted that there was no “effective” opposition to Carías; that he had put the country on a “pay-as-you-go basis” without recourse to “screwball economics”; Tegucigalpa was experiencing a building boom and many streets

⁸⁰ Faust to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2260, April 3, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 31, Vol. 3, cl. 800: Honduras.

now boasted working sewers and paved surfaces; and, finally Carías attended “strictly” to his own business in international affairs. There was, therefore no reason for the Department to object to Carías’ rule, according to the embassy. Only Carías’ decision to change the constitution and continue himself in power was somewhat objectionable. But since this happened first in 1936, Erwin (quite reasonably) told his superiors that “it seems a bit late to object now”.⁸¹

Despite Erwin’s very persistent opposition to Department policy on disreputable governments, he assured his superiors that “the officers of this Embassy recognize that policies [illegible] in Washington rather than in the field and that our first responsibility is to carry out the Department’s policies; in conformity with this principle, we have faithfully adhered to every written instruction from the Department”.⁸² This was no major commitment, as written instructions had ventured no further than to demand that the embassy did not take “any action which might be construed as support of the Carías regime or which Carías might use to extend his term in office”.⁸³ Definite as these words sounded, they were practically meaningless in the Honduran context. Erwin was locally known as a long-standing friend of the regime and anything but his recall or some other *active* denial of support would not change this impression. True, the Department denied weapons deliveries, but this was a very discreet policy and considering Cáceres deceit, perhaps even unknown in Honduras. The only possible source of anxiety to the Carías regime might have been the public denunciations of Latin American dictatorship made by men like Braden in Washington. But as long as no concrete action followed, the caudillo could breathe easy. As the American Military Attaché in Tegucigalpa described the perspective from Honduras:

The attitude of the United States remains the big imponderable which it is [sic.] impossible to evaluate from this end. Towards the end of 1946 various statements by Asst. Secy. of State Braden, Secy. of State Byrnes and Pres. Truman were interpreted to mean that the United States was ready to abandon the Roosevelt policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Latin American countries. However, no such intervention occurred during 1946 and developments during the year tended to support the theory that the United States would not take any action to force the resignation of Pres. Carías...⁸⁴

While it is true that the Department made no attempt to intervene in Honduras, the American ambassador would have had considerable leeway to express opposition the local regime at this point in time. If someone of Braden or Berle’s temperament and ideological inclinations had been the American ambassador to Tegucigalpa during the late 1940s, the Carías regime would most probably have been exposed to U.S.

⁸¹ Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1978, August 3, 1945, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 24 cl. 710: Political Relations. Treaties.

⁸² Faust to Dean Acheson (Acting Secretary of State), May 14, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 31, Vol. 4, cl. 800: Honduras.

⁸³ Byrnes to Erwin, Paraphrase of Telegram received from the Department, March 14, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 32, Vol. 5, cl. 800.1: Chief Executive.

⁸⁴ Brown to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 123-46, December 10, 1946, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 31, Vol. 3, cl. 800: Honduras.

democratic fervor. Considering the American ambassador's very prominent position in Honduras (as opposed to Argentina and Brazil, where Braden and Berle had been stationed) and also considering the wave of anti-dictatorial sentiment in Central America and the Caribbean, U.S. opposition might well have ended the *Cariato*.

Astonishingly, the State Department allowed Erwin to linger in Honduras. Being known as a good friend of Carías, the continued presence of Erwin served to symbolize Washington's unwillingness to enforce its anti-dictatorial policy. When Erwin was finally withdrawn in 1947, the Department's motives for that move were entirely extraneous. At the time, Tennessee Democratic Senator Kenneth McKellar was adamantly opposed to the administration's selection of David E. Lillienthal to head the Atomic Energy Committee. According to newspaper reports, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who was a big supporter of Lillienthal, wanted to punish McKellar for his opposition to the nomination by firing Tennessee's senior diplomat: John Erwin.⁸⁵

Erwin was just one year short of witnessing the end of Carías' presidency. The Honduran chief survived the revolutionary upheavals of 1944, but he was politically astute enough to realize that the era of *continuismo* was over. Thus he decided to "step down but not out", in the words of a biographer, when his term ended in 1948. Unlike Ubico or Martínez, Carías did not have to flee his country or even leave politics completely. He would remain as the chief of his Nationalist Party after 1948 and his administration skillfully orchestrated the election of Juan Manuel Gálvez Durón as president and Julio Lozano Díaz as vice-president. Both men were members of the Nationalist Party and former members of the Carías cabinet: The regime would survive without Carías and Erwin.

4. A CERTAIN IMPATIENCE

Neither Braden nor the Department ever set an objective or timeframe for the policy on disreputable governments. Was the whole hemisphere to become democratic or was a certain measure of democracy in some countries also acceptable? And what did democracy mean? The absence of dictatorship, respect for human rights, the right to vote for everyone? Assuming that Braden and his supporters had some idea of where their policy would lead, it is unclear how much time they believed it would take to obtain tangible "results". Would these be accomplished within a couple of years, within their lifetimes, within several generations? While an answer was never admitted to paper, it is fair to assume that some paybacks were expected within a few years. During the late 1930s it was not certain that democracy would survive at all, but after victory over Fascism, its spread seemed rapid and unstoppable. Former enemies like Germany, Italy, and Japan turned away from dictatorship, European colonial empires disintegrated, and popular revolutions swept the Western Hemisphere—all within the span of some five years. Was it not reasonable to expect that with a few more years and the help of the United States the waves of democracy would have swept most of the world?

⁸⁵ "Furious debate on Lillienthal rages in Senate", *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 25, 1947) 11; "Would consider stopgap aid to Greece: Truman", *CDT* (March 27, 1947) 16; "J. Erwin", *CT*.

The advance of democracy stalled—even reversed—around 1947. It became clear that neither the Soviet Union, most of the old colonial empires, or the economic and military elites would tolerate popular sovereignty. In Latin America, popular revolutions were reversed by reactionary army officers in Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, and El Salvador. Military dictators who were previously considered to be relics of the past, Peron, Trujillo, Carías, and Somoza, managed to hold on—even in the face of U.S. opposition. Democracies like Guatemala went astray with their “screwball economics”.

As Bethell and Roxborough indicate, the move to the right in Latin America was a consequence of internal developments and, as such, it is questionable whether any action on the side of the United States could have prevented it. It is certain, however, that the Braden policy was of little assistance to liberal factions in Latin America. While the most notorious dictators of the Hemisphere were singled out for persecution, there was no real policy to deal with less obnoxious dictators such as Carías. The Department made known its dissatisfaction with the Honduran regime on various occasions, but at the same time allowed its own embassy in Tegucigalpa to blunt its modest endeavors. Policy wavered in the case of hard-to-classify governments such as that of Castañeda, which gradually turned to the right without a hint of concern from Washington. The best opportunity, from a diplomatic angle, to influence the direction of political developments came with the Aguirre coup. While the Department initially snubbed the latter’s military regime, it allowed its international policy of building hemispheric solidarity to take precedence over concern for internal developments in Salvador when it prematurely recognized Aguirre in stead of waiting for Castañeda to take over the presidency. That action was met with disappointment and anger by Salvadoran liberals and probably made it much harder on Simmons to stay in touch with the civilian opposition.

While initially sympathetic to the Guatemalan democratic experiment, the State Department’s patience for its revolutionary aspects—as manifested in foreign adventures and domestic social reform—wore thin all too quickly. While Kyle was rather popular in Guatemala for his friendly interest in the country’s agriculture, he was only interested in the technical aspects of that endeavor while the local government was increasingly preoccupied with social conditions on the countryside. Furthermore, the only time that the ambassador expressed his support for a pro-democratic policy, he betrayed an America-centered perspective, stressing the “rights” of the United States “which have come as the result of saving the world from ruthless dictators twice in a single generation” and made it “the greatest defender of democratic principles of all times”. Thus, while it cannot be said that Kyle actively opposed Guatemalan actions, there was no reason to assume that he would understand the revolutionary fervor or economic nationalism which was evident in that country.

The changing mood in Washington was represented most completely in a 1950 article written by Louis Halle at the behest of the Department and published in *Foreign Affairs*. Halle used the pseudonym “Y” for the article: an obvious reference to Kennan’s “X” article. The article was supposed to define for the public the groundwork of American foreign policy toward Latin America—much like Kennan’s article with regard to the Soviet

Union. While the article has been characterized as signaling the abandonment of Braden's policy, Halle probably considered it a refinement. He starts out by observing "a certain impatience" among Americans with the progress of democracy in Latin America—a reference to the recent public outcry against right-wing military coups in Venezuela and Peru. Somewhat ironically—considering the article's stress on the "political immaturity" of Latin American countries—Halle chides Americans for their tendency to react like a "stern father" towards "his children" whenever political developments in Latin America are not to their liking. "But is the relationship of the United States to the Latin American nations in fact paternal? Or is it fraternal?", Halle asks his readers—rhetorically.⁸⁶

The rest of the article argues firstly that the "historic drive" of the other American republics is "in the direction of the orderly practice of democracy". This is clear from the fact that dictatorships are fewer than they were some 12 years ago—with Ubico, Martínez, and Carías (among others) all gone. Also, the public outcry against government abuses is greater than it was some time ago and even the remaining tyrants present themselves as men of the people and show greater respect for human rights. This is not to say that dictatorship has vanished completely, but "in the alteration that so many countries experience between elective and arbitrary government, the periods of former appear to be growing longer, those of the latter shorter".

Hence, the United States should be patient with this process, because it will be marked by ups and downs: "perhaps in obedience to something like the Hegelian principle of action, reaction and synthesis". Also, this development toward democracy is achieved by "evolution rather than revolution". It will not be attained just by the revolutionary overthrow of dictators. Examples abound, Halle argued, of nations that overthrew their tyrants, only to fall prey to chaos followed by yet another dictatorship because it was not yet "mature" enough for democracy. Since "democratic government is the outward and visible sign of (...) inward and spiritual grace" it cannot be "assumed by a people as one puts on an overcoat". It must be carefully nurtured "over the generations":

Consequently, the realistic approach to the promotion of democracy, regarded as something positive, must endeavor to provide the opportunity and the inspiration for growth. That done it is still necessary to maintain patience with the slowness of the process.

This observation leads Halle to the second part of his argument, regarding the role of the United States in nurturing the trend toward democracy in Latin America. In the recent past, that role was assumed by "paternalistic" interventionists:

Almost invariably, national self-righteousness is dominant in the breast of the interventionists or quasi-interventionists who advocate forcing the Latin Americans to live up to our concept of political democracy. It is outspoken among those who would have us turn our backs on the other American republics because they are unworthy of us.

⁸⁶ Y (Louis Halle), "On a certain impatience with Latin America", *Foreign Affairs: An American Quarterly Review* 28:1/4 (1949-1950) 565-579.

The way forward, according to Halle, was not for the United States to turn its back on “unworthy” governments in Latin America, but to offer positive assistance and to nurture those developments that appeared to promise evolutionary advance toward democracy. Two realistic options were to invite the American Republics to participate equally in the councils of the OAS, thus promoting their sense of responsibility, and to hold up the “moral example” of U.S. domestic politics. “Active cooperation for economic development”, however, was the most promising policy to make a “practical contribution to the growth of democracy”. Assuming that “extreme economic and social misery, and inadequate education are obstacles to the growth of democracy”, Halle believed that aid by the Export-Import Bank and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (in which the U.S. was the principle stockholder), combined with the active dissemination of American technical know-how through the new Point IV program would stimulate Latin American political progress.

The two points of Halle’s argument combined—patience and aid—entailed that the United States would no longer discriminate between supposed democracies and dictatorships. The proposition that all Latin American countries were moving toward more democracy slowly and by ups and downs implied, after all, that the United States could provide aid to any dictatorship and still maintain that it was promoting democracy in the long run. Besides, “it is a popular misconception that you can divide them [the American republic], as they stand today, between those that are immaculate democracies and those that are black dictatorships. All of them are shades of grey”.

