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Chapter 7

SACRIFICES OF WAR
The embassies and the upheavals of 1944

When people [on the Honduran north coast] read and hear American statements regarding the termination of the war, they think of local as well as of European dictators.

~ Vice Consul Julian Nugent, 1943

In the summer of 1943, Julian Nugent, the American Vice Consul at the small consulate of Puerto Cortés, Honduras, toured his district to collect economic information for his reports. It was a difficult journey, quite unimaginable from a modern standpoint or even from the standpoint of American embassy in Tegucigalpa at the time. Nugent had to make part of his trip on a mule; was immediately involved in local intrigues in every village he passed; and found himself caught up in talk of machete charges on the Presidential Palace in the grungy cantinas along the road. Inevitably, Nugent got in touch with people that were beyond his regular circle of acquaintances. Like an entomologist finding a rare species of butterfly, Nugent was surprised to encounter, on one of his mule treks, a “seemingly genuine representative of the average low-income class in Santa Bárbara”. Even more astonishingly, the vice consul reported how this particular specimen:

…described most fulsomely the lost liberties enjoyed during previous regimes, as compared with the present element of suppression. Since this person has never held public office and has little hope of ever getting one under any regime, his opinions—even if they turn out to be illusions—do not appear to be those of a thwarted office seeker. The fact that they are not wholly correct from a historical viewpoint would seem to make little difference, if this person and sufficient other countrymen really believe such opinions.¹

The disconnect between the vice consul and the Honduran worker concerning Honduran history is interesting in itself. If Nugent had shared his view of Honduran political history with his road companion, he might have said something to the effect that Honduras had always been a backward country where a “General” with 20 odd followers could become president.² Americans in Honduras had apparently forgotten that there had been free

¹ Julian L. Nugent (U.S. vice consul to Puerto Cortes) to Thurston, Report 52, August 25, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 12, cl. 800: Continued.
² A paraphrase from Faust’s description of the Honduran political process. John B. Faust (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires a.i. to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 108, June 4, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 13, cl. 820.02: Foreign Activities.

~ Sacrifices of war ~
elections and comparative political liberty in that country during the 1920s. Hondurans, evidently, had not. And even if the Honduran worker from Santa Bárbara idealized the time before the Carías somewhat, his historical recollections were not completely off the mark.

Nugent’s encounter is informative in other respects. The idea that Hondurans could entertain political ideologies which had anything but a direct connection with their immediate interests was quite foreign to the vice consul and his colleagues. Thus, Nugent found the fact that his companion had little hope of obtaining public office particularly noteworthy. It was an indication that the latter’s ideas were not a mere rationalization for his political ambitions. The idée reçue among Americans at the legation was that Honduran politics were an eternal struggle between the “ins” and the “outs” and that there were no significant ideological differences between the two, only conflicting ambitions. Erwin, for example, believed that “the desire to bring about his [Carías’] overthrow is not widespread and is confined to political cliques dominated by disappointed seekers for presidential office”. The fact that, by 1943, discontent had spread beyond the traditional political cliques and involved more than thwarted ambitions had not yet been digested by the embassy’s officers.

Lastly, and intractably tied up with the American perception of Honduran history, politics, and politicians, there is considerable irony in the fact that Nugent was surprised to find that “when people here read and hear American statements regarding the termination of the war, they think of local as well as of European dictators”. The State Department and other government agencies had vigorously pushed the dissemination in Latin America of propaganda about the fight against dictatorship in order to create more sympathy for the “democratic cause”. Due to the notion that Hondurans were backward and politically opportunistic, many American diplomats had not considered it possible that the locals would conceive of the high ideals behind the war as applying to them. Some were more careful than others. Des Portes for example, cautioned the Department in 1942 that a propaganda leaflet about the “Four Freedoms” would not be “politically acceptable in Guatemala”.

Erwin, on the other hand, never considered

\[\text{\footnotesize 3 On Barahona period, see: Dodd, Carías, 43-44 and Argueta, Carías, 56-66.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 4 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 49, May 13, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Revolution. Exiles.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 5 [RSC] to Des Portes, Memorandum for the Minister, August 28, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 60, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-49, September 3, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 60, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 6 Hull to Des Portes, Telegram 2, January 3, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements; Cabot to the Secretary of State, Telegram 4, January 4, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements; Hull to Cabot, Telegram 4, January 8, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements; Cabot to the Secretary of State, Telegram 6, January 17, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements; Cabot to Guy W. ray, January 18, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements; Cabot to the Secretary of State, dispatch 1757,}\]
the possibility that anti-dictatorial propaganda would affront the local government or upset the political status quo. Considering allied propaganda as nothing more than a conceptualization of the war, and Honduras as nothing less than an enthusiastic wartime ally, the minister reported in 1942 that the distribution of a leaflet about the “Four Freedoms” would, in fact, be welcomed in Honduras.7 Erwin was not naïve about the nature of Carias’ government; he knew full well that it was a dictatorship, it was just that he never dreamed that Hondurans could believe that the Four Freedoms applied to them.

Even though Honduras had its own history of liberal politics, as the worker from Santa Bárbara rightly reminded Nugent, American wartime propaganda did contribute to local discontent about the dictatorship. It would be misleading to argue that American propaganda caused the discontent, but the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms did provide a ready-made ideological context for it. And Nugent was right about one thing: if enough Hondurans—and Salvadorans and Guatemalans for that matter—believed in the “democratic cause”, it mattered little if it was intended to apply to them or not. By about 1944, enough Central Americans had concluded that the dictators had to go. That year turned out to be a critical test for the endurance of the caudillos and also for the ability of the embassies to maintain a balance between changing conditions and America’s long term interests. There were many failures that year.

1. THE RISE OF EXPECTATIONS

During the early thirties American diplomats had high hopes for dynamic Central American leaders like Ubico, expecting them to make “prosperous little countries” out of the republics under their stewardship. Even if their foresight was imperfect in other respects, the prewar diplomats were right on this point. At least, by the end of the war most Central American republics had recovered from the depths of the Depression. While it is impossible to estimate how much of the economic recovery was caused by government policy and how much by worldwide economic recovery, it is undeniable that the actions of the isthmian regimes had a profound impact on the social-economic makeup of their countries.8

Depending on the book one reads on the subject, the caudillos have been portrayed as builders, modernizers, and invaluable contributors to the creation of centralized states in Central America, or as military thugs of anachronistic Liberal oligarchies. While no one will deny that the caudillos were socially conservative, or that their economic policies came at a considerable cost to civil liberties, historians have

March 11, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements. Des Portes commented that there was “considerable wonderment in Guatemalan circles that the Government permitted the film to be shown. This country’s experience with dictators is somewhat greater and more actual than that in the United States”. Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1766, March 19, 1941, PR Guatemala, Box 43, cl. 840.06: Amusements.

7 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-65, September 28, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 84, cl. 820.02: Espionage. Propaganda. Gathering of Intelligence.

8 The most complete discussion of this trend, largely from an economic angle, is Bulmer-Thomas, Political Economy, 68-104.
also emphasized their contributions to Central America’s economic and political development. Thomas Dodd, for example, concludes that “Carías laid the foundation for the growth of modern capitalism and development, expanding the state’s role in society”. 9

Other historians claim that, from a wider perspective, caudillismo was merely a holding operation for the obsolete liberal oligarchic system. Mario Argueta, for example, denies that Carías did much of anything to modernize the country: the latter’s rule, while nominally Nationalist and conservative, froze in time the precepts of classic Liberalism and Positivism while the world around Honduras was changing rapidly. 10 Woodward concluded that “[i]n retrospect, these dictatorships appear to have been desperate, rear-guard efforts to save the New Liberal oligarchies and foreign investments from the growing popular force of working people and youth”. 11

One can disagree, therefore, about the role the caudillos played in the modernization of the Central American state and economy: They might be viewed as the prime example of the Central American, Liberal builder and modernizer, but also as the last obstacle in the progression from nineteenth century liberalism to twentieth century social democracy. While they were probably both, every historian can agree on one thing: by the late 1940s, these rulers had outlived their usefulness and outstayed their welcome.

During the war, new opposition movements against the dictatorships developed, but differently in each Central American country. Generally speaking, though, they were urban and middle class (professionals, students, and mid-level army officers); emphasized nonviolent protest (if possible) and the ideals of the Atlantic Charter; and counted an unusually large number of women among its activists. In Guatemala, the movement seems to have lacked formal organization, although, since historians have to rely on the archives of the American embassy for information, it is also possible that opposition organizations in that country were unusually well-hidden or were ignored by American diplomats.

In El Salvador, attempts made to organize opposition under the banner of “democracy” (in the pro-allied, anti-Fascist sense), but such organizations were generally outlawed by the regime. However, a very careful reading of the embassy files does seem to suggest the existence of an informal or underground network or movement. For example, some former members of ADS appear to have found refuge with the editorial staff of a British propaganda periodical. The local press sometimes published articles which were pro-Ally in content, but which also contained implied criticism of the local dictatorship. Lastly, a small number of American businessmen of long residence in San Salvador appear to have sympathized with, and were perhaps involved in, opposition to the regime. These men formed a tenuous link between the U.S. embassy and local discontent.

9 Dodd, Carías, 236.
10 Argueto, Carías, 371-379.
In Honduras, democratically-inspired opposition to the Carías regime seems to have been associated with the traditional Liberal Party, although that organization was itself largely defunct. It is unclear, however, whether people who were dissatisfied with the regime associated themselves with the Party or whether the Party leadership attempted to associate itself with the new undercurrent of dissatisfaction (or both).

Lastly, it seems highly probable, despite local variations, that there were some organized links between the nationally based opposition groups, forming a transnational network of sorts. The existing Central American Union Party (CAUP)—a political movement which pressed for the unification of Central American states—appears to have been an important element in bringing oppositionists from across Central America together. Again, it is not clear whether oppositionists associated with CAUP or vice versa. Moreover, the traditional leader of the Union Party, Salvador Madieta, was closely associated with Anastasio Somoza, the dictator of Nicaragua, making his politics vulnerable to suspicion. Aside from CAUP, there was the continuous flow and intermingling of political refugees in Mexico and Costa Rica (and El Salvador and Guatemala, after the fall of the dictatorial regimes there) which likely stimulated international contacts. But such international coordination as there appeared to be between national opposition movements might also have been caused by ideological sympathy and convergence of interests rather than actual contact.

There seems to have been no organized political opposition to the central governments in the Central American countryside, although urban opposition groups, the liberal governments that originated from the latter, and historians suggested that there was a connection between the new movements and the suppressed peons. This is not to argue that Central American Indian and/or peasant populations were not suppressed, or even that they accepted their lot passively. It simply implies that the interests, methods, and objectives of the rural populations differed from those of the urban populations in Central America. Thus, rural union organizations and strikes mushroomed from roughly 1944 onwards, but it was usually not directed at the overthrow of the central government or even in sympathy with the goals of the urban middle class. In other cases rural populations had found ways to protect their interests within the structure of dictatorial state and had no interest in subverting it. Recent research suggests, for example, that the Martínez government allied itself with the Indian populations of western El Salvador—the very same populations that had been subject to the Matanza in the early 1930s. Since the urban middle class populations, despite their liberal politics, shared many of the fears and prejudices toward Indians with the aristocratic classes, an alliance between those former groups was not easily established in any case. In some instances, the failing dictatorial regimes tried to evoke the urban dweller’s fear for the Indian by actually stimulating the rural populations to revolt or by transporting hundreds of peasants armed with machetes to the cities to hold pro-government demonstrations—

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thereby attempting to scare the middle classes into supporting their “peace and order” regimes.\(^{13}\)

### 2. THE EMBASSIES AND THE OPPOSITION

The legations’ experience with the opposition before 1944 was not a happy one. Due to the demands of wartime work and close cooperation with the local regimes, the Americans had no real understanding of the growing feeling of discontent among the urban middle classes. Old prejudices on the lack of political maturity of Central Americans did not help the matter. Something of a dialogue did develop between the Legations and the middle classes, but it was characterized by mutual misunderstandings. Many local oppositionists did not want to keep their ideals and plans hidden from the Americans. Taking American propaganda in favor of the “democratic cause” at face value, some hoped that the embassies could be involved in their political ambitions and sent their manifestos to the ambassadors—yet when the Americans did not react favorably to these entreaties, they became ever more accusatory, rather than solicitous, in tone.

#### 2.1 Growing opposition in El Salvador

After his experience with the suppression of ADS, Frazer remained aloof of the periodical expressions of discontent and focused his energies on the war-effort. In May 1942, another attempt was made to involve the minister in local politics by a newly founded organization of “anti-Fascist” writers—composed of journalists who hoped that they could avoid the regime’s censors by defining their activities in terms of the democratic cause. The organization quickly named Frazer its honorary president and informed the American legation that it would gladly follow its instructions, in effect surrendering itself to American protection. Frazer remained noncommittal, however. When the Martínez regime started to harass the anti-Fascist writers, the legation brushed it off as the latest episode of “political passions” that plagued the Latins. Likewise, when the legation found that the Salvadoran government had temporarily imprisoned political exiles from Honduras, Frazer would not confront the authorities about this because it was extremely “sensitive” to critique on its practice of keeping prisoners incommunicado and Frazer did not want to give “needless offence”.\(^{14}\)


\(^{14}\) Frazer, Memorandum on *Grupo de Escritores Anti-Fascista*, May 18, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 58, cl. 500: Congresses and Conferences; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2488, May 26, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 58, cl. 500: Congresses and Conferences; Maleady, Memorandum on Salvadoran Censorship of Newspapers and Radio Stations, July 20, 1942, PR El Salvador, Box 75, cl. 891: Public Press; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1826, February 26, 1942, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 6, cl. 800: Exiles and Revolutionaries; Maleady, Memorandum on Detention of Honduran Political Exiles, March 4, 1942, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 6, cl. 800: Exiles and Revolutionaries; Frazer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2186, March 11, 1942 PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 6, cl. 800: Exiles and Revolutionaries.
In early 1943, Frazer reached retirement age and left the service. Walter Clarence Thurston took charge of the Salvadoran post. Like Frazer—but markedly unlike his colleagues at the other Central American capitals—Thurston was a career diplomat with extensive experience in Latin American affairs and had an admirable grasp of the Spanish language. Born in the nineteenth century, Thurston was an “old school gentleman” who liked to quote Talleyrand and told his younger officers not to display “too much zeal”. The new minister was distinctly proud of what he claimed was his involvement in developing the Good Neighbor policy, particularly the non-intervention element. Thus, Thurston was both temperamentally inclined to remain aloof of politics and—unlike Frazer whose justifications for noninterference were somewhat uncertain—entertained a sophisticated understanding of his diplomatic duties, based on the Good Neighbor principle.\(^{15}\)

Thurston was a serious looking man who, with his round spectacles and impeccably combed hair, looked more like a village school teacher than the tested diplomat that he really was. In 1939, he led the evacuation of the American legation near the Republican government of Spain, running a “gantlet of bombs” while Barcelona surrendered to Franco’s troops. Some years later, when distinctly unlucky Thurston was chargé d’affaires in the Soviet Union, he had to evacuate his post because German troops were quickly advancing on the capital. Neither was he a stranger to Latin American revolutions: in 1920, he was the American chargé to Guatemala during the overthrow of the dictatorial Cabrera regime. The Salvadoran assignment offered no respite to the new minister: the pressures of wartime diplomacy had not abated yet while local political tensions were coming to the surface. Thurston was to lead his post through yet another crisis.\(^{16}\)

While he had to devote much of his time to the war-effort, Thurston did seem to regret, however, that the normal, peacetime work of the legation suffered under the strain of war—needlessly so. Around March, the minister informed the Department that, as the real crisis of the war was abating, his post should not be burdened with the many required reports on wartime measures. Even more important, he felt that it was high time that the Department provide some guidance for its policy toward El Salvador.\(^{17}\)

By the time Thurston made this carefully worded complaint, there was a real need for policy guidelines concerning local politics, as opposed to wartime policies. Local politics were heating up as rumors spread that Martínez was preparing another

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\(^{17}\) Stettinius to the U.S. Embassies and Consulates in Latin America, February 26, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 90, cl. 120: Foreign Service of the United States.
"reelection", this time for the 1944-1948 tenure. The Salvadoran president himself attempted to mentally prepare the minister for the continuismo campaign almost from the day he arrived at his post. He explained to Thurston, during the ceremonies surrounding the latter's presentation of credentials, that "liberty" in El Salvador was not the kind of liberty that a North American might be used to. At the same time, the regime used every trick in the book to suggest that the United States supported the new continuismo campaign: In his weekly speeches, which were themselves inspired on Roosevelt's fireside chats, Martínez regularly referred to wartime cooperation and the many American projects to improve roads, sanitation, and agriculture in Salvador—suggesting that his regime provided an irreplaceable link between Salvador and American largesse.

Complementing the government's public propaganda was the tried and tested Central American tactic of the "whispering campaign": a welter of planted rumors which suggested that the United States would never accept a change of regime during the war. Naturally, Martínez needed some more substantial signs of American support to back up his claims. So, on July 7, Thurston was officially invited to attend a banquet in Santa Anna in honor of Martínez, which turned out to be the official kick-off of Martínez' reelection campaign. The embassy found out about the real purpose of the banquet when it was too late to decline the formal invitation outright without causing something of a diplomatic scandal.

Continuismo had always been met with particularly stubborn resistance in El Salvador. During the 1943 campaign, that resistance was even more dogged than four years earlier. Much like the regime, the opposition aggressively sought American

18 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1, January 14, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 76, cl. 123: Thurston.
19 For example: Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 214, March 23, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 802.1: Executive Departments; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 259, April 6, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 802.1: Executive Departments; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 269, April 8, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 802.1: Executive Departments; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 115, February 19, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 803: Legislative Branch.
20 Ellis to Thurston, September 9, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol. I, cl. 800: El Salvador.
22 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 498, June 26, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol I, cl. 711.3: Proclaimed List; Acheson to Thurston, Instruction 259, July 27, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol I, cl. 711.3: Proclaimed List; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 966, November 16, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol I, cl. 711.3: Proclaimed List; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1080, December 16, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol I, cl. 711.3: Proclaimed List; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1119, December 29, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol I, cl. 711.3: Proclaimed List.
backing, although, unlike the regime, it seems to have been under the impression that the United States really did sympathize with its fight against dictatorship. Oppositionists lined up to speak with the ambassador, sent him their own propaganda leaflets, and initiated their own whispering campaign—always emphasizing the supposed analogies between the fight against European Fascism and Central American dictatorship. Toward the end of 1943, a local student organization, the Frente Democrático Universitario, attempted to involve the embassy more directly in its protests against continismo: On December 4, the students presented a plan to Thurston to hold a parade on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, supposedly to demonstrate their support for the Four Freedoms and Atlantic Charter and their solidarity with the American people. The parade would end at the American embassy and its climax would be the presentation of some sort of petition to the ambassador. Most probably, that text would be a veiled attack on the Martínez regime and its suppression of the Four Freedoms.

While Thurston lacked firm policy guidelines, or even the opportunity to do an in-depth investigation of the local situation, his natural inclination as an experienced “Good Neighbor” was to avert all attempts to draw him into local politics—which he did with considerable skill. On the one hand, the ambassador discouraged the “scoundrels” of the regime to seek his help. Being unable to ignore the invitation to the government’s banquet in Santa Anna outright, Thurston convinced the organizers that pressing matters prevented his attendance and sent two lower ranking officers in his place. Seeing through the regime’s ploy to involve the embassy in a reform of the constitution, the embassy informed authorities in no uncertain terms that the United States had requested no changes to the constitution; that Salvadoran laws enabling the prosecution of the war were deemed adequate; and that the government should make no attempt to convey the impression that the United States was in any way involved with the contemplated revisions. Perhaps Thurston’s most significant action was to cancel the shipment of 1,000 American sub-machineguns to the Salvadoran government. Navy

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23 The 1943 files are replete with examples of this kind of activity. For a non-exhaustive sample covering the month of September, see: Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 714, September 1, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; “El pueblo Salvadoreño” to Thurston, September 4, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Maleady, Memorandum on Efforts of President Martínez to oust Certain Officials of Banco Hipotecario, September 9, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; “Asociacion Nacional Democrática” to Thurston, September 21. 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; “Frente Magisterial Democrático” to Thurston, September 28, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 801, September 28, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador.

24 Rafael Eguízabal h. et al. to Thurston, December 4, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador.

25 Thurston to Callardo, July 24, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol. 1, cl. 800: El Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 618, July 28, 1943, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 8, Vol. 1, cl. 800: El Salvador.

intelligence had informed the legation that these weapons would probably be distributed to members of Pro Patria, to be used against the opposition in imitation of the 1932 Matanza.28

Having told off the president’s henchmen without confronting Martínez directly, Thurston felt that he had to take the same position in his dealings with the opposition.29 Thus, the ambassador often received oppositionists personally and politely listened to their critique of the government, only to inform them that he was completely neutral in the matter.30 The case of the student demonstration offered something of a challenge since its purported intention was to support the allied cause. Initially, the ambassador informed the students that he appreciated their initiative, but that he could not receive their petition on December 8, as the anniversary of Pearl Harbor was an official holiday. Having no intention to give up that easily, the students informed Thurston that they would happily postpone their parade to December 11, the day that war was declared on Fascism. This time, Thurston could only offer the rather thin excuse that he wished all manner of celebration to be called off until final victory in the war was secure. Without the embassy’s patronage, the student parade, which had been intended to be a grand affair with much waving of the Salvadoran and American flags, turned out to be a modest gathering of some 400 nervous students (one sixth of whom, in the estimate of an embassy observer, were actually undercover policemen). While the government did not break up the supposedly pro-allied demonstration, some of the student leaders were spirited away by what oppositionists had come to describe as the Gestapo Martinista.31

Thus it appeared, at first glance, that Thurston managed to steer clear of local politics. Incidentally, the private sympathies of embassy officials seem to have been somewhat at variance with their public stance. The Americans recognized that many oppositionists were conservative members of the professional classes, among whom were many friends and acquaintances of the embassy rather than the “communist” radicals described in government publications. Moreover, government suppression, long hidden from the public view, came out into the open with soldiers patrolling the streets and policemen lifting prominent lawyers and doctors from their beds and carrying them

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29 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1070, December 13, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador.
30 For example: Thurston, untitled memorandum, September 8, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, dispatch 955, November 12, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador.
31 Thurston to Eguizábal, December 4, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Eguizábal to Thurston, December 6, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Thurston, untitled memorandum, December 11, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Eguizábal to Thurston, December 13, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; Thurston to the Secretary of State, dispatch 1070, December 13, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador; G.B. Massey U.S. Acting Military Attaché to El Salvador) to Thurston, December 14, 1943, PR El Salvador, Box 82, cl. 800: Salvador.
The younger members of Thurston’s staff were sometimes unable to withhold their indignation over this situation from their official reports and it appears that even the ambassador himself, while trying to uphold his own maxim not to display “too much zeal”, had to make an effort not to let his personal views color his assessments.

But whichever direction the sympathy of the embassy went, it maintained—perhaps had no choice but to maintain—a cordial working relationship with the regime when wartime cooperation was concerned. Despite some indications in opposite direction, Thurston maintained the widely held conviction that the local dictators would survive the war. The embassy had no reliable indication of the extent of opposition to Martínez’ government. Furthermore, while Thurston’s adherence to the nonintervention principle was beyond reproach when the traditional theatre of diplomacy was concerned, times had changed since the introduction of the Good Neighbor. Some fifteen years earlier, diplomats of Thurston’s generation had been in charge of small posts, with staffs of two officers and some clerks in the case of Central America. The chief of mission was generally able to put his stamp on all matters of diplomatic importance. Toward the end of the War, however, even the staffs of the small Central American posts had grown to include officers specialized in legal, cultural, intelligence, economic, and sanitary matters—bringing many spheres of local life into the field of one or another American embassy officer. While the “chief” coordinated the activities of these new officials, he generally limited his activities to diplomacy and rarely grasped the implications of his post’s increased activity in non-political matters.

Mainly due to the efforts of a local American businessman who was in close touch, and obviously in sympathy, with local oppositionists from the professional classes, the embassy in El Salvador was most fully informed of the views that local discontents held of the War, United States policy, and the Martínez dictatorship. The businessman in question was Winnall Dalton, father to the famous Salvadoran poet and revolutionist Roque Dalton and grandfather to “Roquito” and Juan José Dalton, founding members of the F.M.L.N. While apparently little known to historians, the Dalton family’s tradition of opposition to right-wing terror began with Winnall, not Roque. Although the pater familias was considerably more conservative than his heirs, in the context of 1944 El Salvador he was a true revolutionary. And thanks to his position as one of the most successful American businessmen in Salvador, he had the attention of the American ambassador.\(^{32}\)

Winnall’s first attempt to approach Thurston about the rising discontent among the professional classes was a letter which described the latter’s plight in detail. Dalton claimed that he merely wanted to know how to respond to questions from his Salvadoran friends, who observed that while the State Department would not intervene against the dictators, it had in fact intervened on many occasions during the War and therefore had a “moral responsibility” toward the Salvadoran opposition. The United States, Dalton’s friends said, had intervened to keep Nazi-sympathizers from being appointed to government offices; to deport Axis nationals and liquidate their property; to protect

American economic interests; to plant pro-Ally information in the papers; to supply lend-lease weapons to the regime, etc. Furthermore, Minister Frazer had publically defended the Martínez regime and its cooperative stance during the war and had allowed the dictator to adopt the pro-democratic language of the war while he was in effect a “nazi-fascist”. Aside from the political and economic angle…

You intervened, with sincere sentiments we desire to believe, to give us sewers and modern slaughterhouses, swimming pools and bridges, highways and school-children feeding-programs. WHY? (…) We have had no voice in accepting these gifts you have brought. You have dealt with the illegal government your legation helped to perpetuate and your country has sustained by recognition. We resent this Good Neighbor program of yours – we do not want charity and you offend us by extending it. You are a great and powerful people – why do you give us sewers but aid in the denial of Human Rights?

Dalton’s letters—too many and too long to deal with in full—represent the gap that had come to exist between the American conception of fighting a war for democracy and the Central American conception of living under a U.S. supported dictatorship. “Will it not be shameful for you Americans to see our people mowed down by your General Grant tanks? Could you not find a better and honorable use for them – or scrap them if you have too many?”, this letter pleaded, “To whom do you pretend to be a Good Neighbor? To the dictator or to the people of El Salvador?”

Initially, Dalton’s letters on behalf of the Salvadoran middle classes caught Thurston’s interest and the ambassador counseled the Department that it might consider these sentiments in the definition of its post-war policy. Thurston summarized the views of the opposition, quite correctly it would seem, as follows:

Our pronouncements such as the Atlantic charter and the Declaration of the Four Freedoms (the latter blazoned by us throughout El Salvador in the form of posters) are accepted literally by the Salvadorans as official endorsement of basic democratic principles which we desire to have prevail currently and universally, as is our assertion that the present war is a conflict between the forces of good and evil exemplified by the democratic doctrine and absolutism. It is difficult for them to reconcile these pronouncements with the fact that the United States tolerates and apparently is gratified to enter into association with governments in America which cannot be described as other than totalitarian – such as those headed by Getulio Vargas, General Trujillo, General Ubico, General Somoza, General Carías and, particularly, General Martínez.

However, the ambassador reported, “a problem of this complex nature is not susceptible of ready solution and the most that should be attempted at this time is an empirical
search for improvements and careful study of plans for a revision of policy after the 
war".  

Despite his initial sympathy, Thurston was very distraught when it became clear 
that the opposition would not await the outcome of empirical searches and careful 
studies. As revolutionary ferment against the Martínez regime came out into the open 
and required some response from the embassy lest it remain on record as a supporter of 
the dictator, the ambassador became frustrated with the “unfair” interpretations of U.S. 
policy. Complaining that the Latin mind, which was often concealed beneath a “plausible 
appearance of cosmopolitanism”, could not wrap itself around U.S. policy, Thurston 
argued in June 1944 that from “our point of view (...) it would appear to be beyond 
further discussion that we have established and observed a policy of strict non-
intervention”. Parroting Dalton’s letters, the ambassador angrily noted after the fall of 
Martínez that 

“Prominent and seemingly intelligent Salvadorans have informed me with 
conviction that the road building activities, the activities of the Health and 
Sanitation Division, and other undertakings being conducted by us here 
constitute intervention. These “acts of intervention” were frequently cited to 
me as an argument for political intervention – “You are intervening in all 
these ways, why pretend that you cannot intervene to rid us of a dictatorship 
and prevent civil war?”

2.2 Growing opposition in Guatemala 

Already in 1941, Ubico legalized his continuance after 1944 by having the rubber-stamp 
congress review some “petitions” from “all over the country” which “demanded” that the 
President finish his good works. As in Salvador, local impatience with the Guatemalan 
regime increased in conjuncture with the new continuismo campaign, particularly 
because it occurred shortly after congress had approved a $200,000.00 “gift” to the 
President. This demonstrated that even Ubico’s much respected fight against official 
corruption was weaning. Government repression appears to have increased significantly 
during the war years, although the legation’s files are largely quiet on the matter— 
possibly because it regularly confused suppression of local opposition and suppression 
of Nazi plots. Not less than 90 people were arrested for “talking against” congress’ 
generous gift to the president.  

Ubico himself began to show signs of increasing anxiety 
and his notoriously inflammable mood included increasingly violent impulses. While the 
regime had generally relied on exile and short imprisonments before the war, torture and 
execution became more common during the early 1940s, with Ubico reportedly joining in 
the former activity. Legation officials had to bear some of the brunt of Ubico’s temper as

35 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1154, January 8, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 98, 
Vol. XIII, cl. 800: El Salvador. Vargas and Trujillo were the presidents of Brazil and the Dominican 
Republic respectively. 
36 Thurston to the Secretary of State, dispatch 1706, June 12, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 93, cl. 
124: Records. Correspondence. 
37 Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1250, May 8, 1940, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 
3, cl. 800.1: Government.
Chapter 7

the president’s diatribes against “communists” and the laxness of the American system increased. 38

The split among the ranks of Americans in Guatemala continued through 1943. Naval Attaché Frank June attempted at various points to get the legation in touch with dissatisfied elements, but, perhaps partly due to the personal friction between Des Portes and the attaché, the legation ignored June’s efforts. 39

The growing opposition toward the regime, combined with friction among legation officers and Ubico’s growing paranoia, caused an incident with far reaching consequences in 1943. Yet the details are sketchy because many of the legation files documenting it appear to have been destroyed. In that year, a [young] oppositionist from the Mirón family was arrested for plotting against the government. After interrogation and, probably, torture, Mirón named several accomplices, most of them young Guatemalan professionals like himself but also including several members of the diplomatic corps: Mexican ambassador Del Rio; Military Attaché June; Colonel Glass, the American director of the Guatemalan military academy; and Secretary Dunn of the American legation.

While it is highly unlikely that these people were actually involved in a plot against the government, it seems probable that there was enough circumstantial evidence to compromise their standing with local authorities. All the individuals mentioned appear to have been good friends with some of the Guatemalan plotters. This was not surprising in itself, since they were of comparable age and social background and, in tiny Guatemala City, likely became acquainted at official or societal occasions. By piecing together several otherwise unrelated snippets of information from the legation’s files, it also seems probable that June, Glass, and Dunn shared a negative view of the local regime with their Guatemalan friends and ambassador Del Rio. June’s views are, of course, well known by now. The major made several references in his reports to the Mexican ambassador whom he seems to have held in high esteem (at one point, June reports to his department, perhaps as a intentional affront to Des Portes, that Del Rio was the “most forceful” diplomat in Guatemala). Del Rio shared his very low opinion of Ubico with June on several occasions and throughout his tenure tried to ingratiate himself with Guatemalan discontent. 40 Glass appears to have joined June and Del Rio in several of these talks and may also have expressed an undiplomatic opinion about the Ubico government in public, since legation files refer to the colonel’s many “indiscretions”.

June reported his suspicion that Ubico sent fake oppositionists to his office to hear him out on several occasions. He also suspected that Ubico kept an eye on the legation

38 Des Portes to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2057, August 14, 1941, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800:1: Chief Executive; Dudley Dwyre (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Guatemala), Memorandum for the Files, December 4, 1941, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 4, cl. 800: political Affairs.
39 [PR], untitled memorandum, January 18, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 60, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 10-43, January 11, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 131: Naval Attaché.
40 Ivan Smith (Assistant Naval Attaché) to June, untitled memorandum, May 1, 1942, PR Guatemala, Box 57, cl. 800: Mexico.
and its officers. It seems probable, therefore, that Ubico was well-aware of the unsympathetic attitude of several American officials. Whatever young Mirón did or did not “confess”, Ubico seems to have jumped at the opportunity to make life hard on his enemies in the diplomatic corps. Due to aforementioned gaps in the files of the American legation—in combination with the legation’s request to the Guatemalan government to have all references to the American legation removed from the government’s files on the Mirón case—it is unclear how far Ubico took his protests or even what the nature of the allegations against legation officers was. What is clear, is that the legation set to work almost immediately to dissociate itself from all persons connected to the Mirón case. Although the link is undocumented, it is telling that shortly after the Mirón confessions, June, Glass, and Dunn were all transferred out of Guatemala. The Mexican government also withdrew Del Rio from the country.

Some months later, Des Portes himself was transferred to Costa Rica because of the Department’s fear that the Guatemalan government would declare him persona non grata. This time, the incident seems not to be related to the Mirón case, but to an old vendetta between the minister and the Guatemalan minister of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Salazar. Always serious about the supposed Nazi fifth column, Des Portes had lobbied hard to have the assets of the economically very powerful and allegedly pro-Nazi [Nottebohm] family [expropriated/frozen/blacklisted]. Naturally, this Guatemalan-German family had very powerful connections, among them Salazar, the former attorney of the family. According to Des Portes’ own account regarding the circumstances surrounding his transfer, it was the intrigues of the “pro Nazi” foreign minister that discredited him with the Guatemalan authorities. Since Des Portes’ transfer occurred shortly after the Mirón case, one can speculate that Salazar, or other enemies of the minister, made their move in [late] 1943 because the Mirón case had demonstrated the Americans’ extreme sensitivity to the displeasure of the Ubico regime.

Des Portes was replaced by Boaz W. Long, who went to Guatemala with some misgivings, as he had hoped to be named ambassador to one of the bigger Latin American republics. Despite his obsession with roads and his interest in the ruined Guatemalan city of Antigua, the restoration of which seems to have been one of Long’s new projects, the new ambassador’s capacity for work soon had the embassy up and running again since there was no time for a letdown while the war continued: “No American should lull himself asleep thinking that we have accomplished something very wonderful because there is a great deal of German influence left [in Guatemala],

41 June to Navy Intelligence Division, Serial 16-43, January 19, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 69, cl. 121: Naval Attaché.
42 Drew, Memorandum on Subjects discussed by the American Ambassador, Mr. Boaz Long, with his Excellency, Licenciado don Carlos Salazar, July 16, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 79, cl. 800.2: Cabinet; Long, Memorandum of Conversation with Carlos Salazar, July 16, 1943, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 6, cl. 800.
43 Drew to Des Portes, February 17, 1943, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 7, cl. 123: Foreign Service Officers.
although it is not as openly manifest as in the past”.44 One of the first reports completed during Long’s tenure was an inventory of German activities and Guatemalan wartime cooperation. The new ambassador found that Germans were less confident about the outcome of the war than they had been before and Guatemalans who formerly sympathized with the Axis were now switching allegiance to the United Nations. A report on the stability on the regime was deemed unnecessary since the political situation was stable in Long’s assessment and had been so, with the exception of minor incidents, since the start of the Ubico administration.45

With Ubico’s next term fast approaching, oppositionists tried to get the Americans on their side. Word on the street was that with the end of the war in sight, the United States was beginning to rethink its relationship to the Latin American dictators and some believed that Long had been sent to replace Des Portes, assumed to be an old friend of Ubico, to prepare the country for such a move.46 They were soon disappointed. The first attempt by local oppositionists from the professional classes to get in touch with Long was a polite request from one Dr. Bianchi to talk with several “young gentlemen”, who, it was carefully implied, were out of tune with the present political situation. Long rejected the invite with equal courtesy, noting in his diary that “I thought it would be better not to receive groups of persons who might be unfriendly to the government, in view of our policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of other nations”. Again, the notion that the United States could remain entirely neutral in local affairs appeared outdated: Some months earlier, Ubico had told legislators that relations with the United States had never been better: The many public works that were being completed in Guatemala with American participation served to underscore the close ties, the caudillo claimed. As a symbol of the Guatemalan president’s closeness to his American counterpart, a new hospital was completed and dedicated “Hospital Roosevelt”.47

In fact, Long appears to have been biased to the status quo in Guatemala. Calculations in his diary show that in the 122 years of Guatemalan independence, the country had been ruled by dictators more than half of the time. The ambassador

44 Diary entries of October 31 and November 1, 1943, Long Papers, Box 66, file 333: Diaries. On his interest in Antigua: Diary entry of November 7, 1943, Long Papers, Box 66, file 333: Diaries and Diary entry of June 18, 1944, Long Papers, Box 66, file 334: Guatemalan Diary, 1944. Long notes that the inhabitants of that city are very poor and “sort of helpless and devoid of initiative. It would be interesting if some psychological stimulus could tend to rouse them from their lethargy”. Long appears to believe that the ruined state of Antigua was due to the “lethargy” of its inhabitants. The real culprit, incidentally, was a major 18th century earthquake and subsequent neglect by the central authorities.

45 Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 115, June 22, 1943, PR Guatemala (SFC), Box 9, cl. 820.02: Espionage and Propaganda; Long to Stewart, November 12, 1943, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 8, cl. 800: General.

46 Gerald A. Drew (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to Guatemala) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 880, February 22, 1944, PR Guatemala (SCF), Box 10, cl. 800: Guatemala. This report also contains an interesting account on how the Legation deals with the regime and the opposition in light of the non-intervention principle.

47 Drew to the Secretary of State, Despatch 3683, Match 11, 1943, PR Guatemala, Box 79, cl. 803: Legislative Branch.
seemingly believed that this was the natural state for a Central American republic.\textsuperscript{48} This may appear to be an uncharacteristically fatalistic view for a man who was so single-mindedly devoted to the uplift of Latin peoples, but in fact, Long’s desire to help backward peoples had always been directed at economic development, not the “moral” or political kind. When an American called Renwick visited Long in April 1944—they were old acquaintances from Long’s previous work in El Salvador—the former revealed to the ambassador a plan “for developing Central America, particularly for easing over the transition period from dictatorship to constitutional governments, which must inevitably follow the approaching (?) peace”. Eager to drop the subject, Long suggested to Renwick that he talk to Thurston about it. Privately, the ambassador felt that “it seemed doubtful that any one who was active in our Foreign Service would get very far by dropping into Washington and making proposals calculated to eliminate the dictators from the Central American Republics”. In the long run, “circumstances beyond our control could do this without our intervention”.\textsuperscript{49}

With some six months to go before Ubico’s downfall, the entire embassy staff was assembled to report on the local political situation at the request of the Department. “Relations between the United States and Guatemala are excellent”, was the general consensus: “the Government, under the direction of President Ubico, has cooperated wholeheartedly for the advancement of the common war effort”. Echoing older rumors and suspicions that several officers of the administration were in fact Nazi sympathizers, the report noted that “the policy of friendship and cooperation with the United States pursued by President Ubico more than nullifies any such sentiments within the Government”. As for the future of the regime:

…the internal political situation of Guatemala is as stable as that of any country in Central and possibly South America. While it may be true that the Guatemalan people have lost a certain measure of freedom of speech and political activity under the administration of President Ubico, it is nevertheless true that the country as a whole has benefited by stability and honesty in public administration. While there is an element of discontent in the country, the opposition of persons constituting this faction is based largely on dissatisfaction with lack of change rather than any specific complaint against the President or the administration. Such elements, furthermore, are disorganized and leaderless and are completely lacking in the physical means of bringing about an overthrow of the administration.\textsuperscript{50}

2.3 Growing opposition in Honduras
For years, opposition to the Carias regime had been led by disgruntled presidential hopefuls and many “generals” from his own National Party and from the Liberal Party. Several armed incursions into Honduras from neighboring states were attempted by the

\textsuperscript{48} Diary entry of November 20, 1943, Long Papers, Box 66, file 333: Diaries.
\textsuperscript{49} Diary entry of April 9, 1944, Long Papers, Box 66, file 334: Guatemalan Diary, 1944. Long admitted that Renwick’s ideas “were pretty good, theoretically. How they would have worked out in practice, no one could foresee”.
\textsuperscript{50} Drew to the Secretary of State, Despatch 726, January 4, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala.
traditional oppositionists, especially around the 1936 continuismo campaign. Yet, being poorly coordinated, all expeditions were repulsed with relative ease by the central government, partly due to the rather formidable air force that Carsías had built. Incidentally, the effect of Carsía’s famed use of military airplanes (he was probably the first military leader in the world to use airpower against civilian targets) seems to have been largely psychological: one journalist estimates that throughout the 1930s, the Honduran air force claimed only two victims: one mule and one rebel general. Considering that there was no scarcity of generals in Honduras, the death of the mule was probably the greatest loss that Carsía’s pilots inflicted on the enemy.

Prewar opposition to Carsía was characterized mostly by division. Angel Zúñiga Huete was the most well-known Liberal opponent of the caudillo, but there were dissidents within his own party and only a tenacious alliance was maintained with the rebellious Legalista wing of the National Party—consisting of former members of Carsía’s party and led by the latter’s one-time vice presidential candidate, Venancio Callejas. Moreover, opposition leaders were scattered all over Central America and Mexico where they were often used as pawns in the diplomatic games between the caudillos, who, according to the expediency of the moment, either helped or harassed the Honduran exiles. It was difficult for the exiled leaders to communicate securely and secretly, which, together with their very different political backgrounds, partly explains why they never managed to agree on a strategy to oust Carsía: some preferred armed invasions, others wished to employ legal measures, while yet a third group managed to reconcile itself with the Cariato over time.

As in other Central American countries, new opposition to the regime gained strength inside Honduras during the war. Like those in neighboring states, the Honduran variant was middle class, urban, inspired by the war against Fascism, and could be roughly divided into a military wing and a civilian wing. But there were also important differences between developments in Honduras and in the rest of Central America. For one, Carsía, the former militia general, had resisted all pressures in favor of the professionalization of the Honduran army. Only his air force and “honor guard” were well-trained and equipped. Contact between Honduran troops and American troops during the war were kept to a minimum and the caudillo were very reluctant to send officers abroad for training. Hence, the professional cadre of young officers that played a significant role in the 1944 revolutions in Salvador and Guatemala was much smaller.

51 William Krehm, *Democracies and Tyrannies of the Caribbean* (Westport, CT, 1984) 90. To be fair, Krehm quotes a lot of “amusing” facts and anecdotes about the Latin American dictatorships of the time. Many of these stories seem to originate from Central American oppositionists and exiles or the American press and sometimes bear a strong resemblance, in style or substance, to O. Henry’s classic story on the “banana republics” and other such satirical treatments of Central America. Therefore, and even though it makes interesting reading, Krehm’s rather well-known and much quoted book has been largely ignored in this text.

52 Cousins to Maj. J.H. March (U.S. Military Attaché to Honduras), December 30, 1940, PR Honduras; Unsigned (Erwin) to Philip W. Bonsal (Acting Chief of the Division of American Republic Affairs), March 11, 1942, PR Honduras, Box 82, cl. 800: Honduras. Also see: Bratzel, *Latin America*, 12 and 36-39 and Dodd, *Carsía*, 81-82.
and weaker in Honduras. Furthermore, Honduras was economically the most backward of all Central American countries. The exploitation of its main export crop, bananas, was in the hands of American companies which had formed an enclave economy in the north of Honduras. The rate of urbanization was correspondingly low in Honduras: Tegucigalpa was the largest city with some 70,000 inhabitants. The second largest city, San Pedro Sula, was far behind with roughly 20,000 inhabitants. Thus, the urban middle class of Honduras was also much smaller than the (in itself relatively insignificant) middle classes of neighboring states.\textsuperscript{53}

The National-Liberal divide had been a fixture of Honduran political life for two or three decades. The Liberal Party was divided between an exiled community and a group of Liberals that was still resident in Honduras itself, although it kept a low profile to avoid harassment. It was convenient for the regime to focus on the Liberal Party as a readily identifiable enemy. The Liberals were easily linked to other enemies of the moment, particularly Mexican “communists” and German “Nazis”, thus maintaining a straightforward divide between “good” (Nationalist) and “evil” (Liberal) which offered the necessary flexibility.

Minister Erwin never met any of the opponents of Carías. Zúñiga Huete and Callejas had left Honduras in 1932 and 1936 respectively, well before Erwin took charge of his post. Therefore, much of what Erwin knew about the traditional opposition, he learned from the Carías government itself. During the war, as the legation and the regime cooperated closely, Carías and his underlings aggressively pushed an image of the old Liberal Party as being a crypto-Fascist organization, an image that Erwin came to adopt and convey to Washington. Erwin seems to have overlooked the development of discontent among new social groups entirely. With the exception, perhaps, of minister […] Stewart in Nicaragua—who was reportedly so beholden to Somoza’s wishes that the caudillo himself sardonically referred to the diplomat as “my steward”—Erwin became one of the most despised American diplomats among Central American oppositionists.

During the early years of the war Erwin adopted Carías’ claim that the Liberals had a working relationship with Nazi agents\textsuperscript{54}, despite the fact that other diplomatic posts reported on several occasions that proof for the connection was nonexistent.\textsuperscript{55} Rather

\textsuperscript{53} Dodd, \textit{Carías}, 183-209 and Argüeta, \textit{Carías}, 268-326 both dedicate a chapter to the discussion of opposition to the Carías regime. Together, they provide a fairly detailed image of the Honduran opposition movements. Curiously, Argüeta’s discussion of the opposition is based almost entirely on the files of American legation, while that of Dodd is based largely on interviews and Honduran sources. Dodd’s discussion is rather confusing at times, while Argüeta’s can be rather bland.

\textsuperscript{54} Erwin to the Secretary of State, May 31, 1940, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 2, cl. 879.6: TACA; Division of Commercial Affairs to Cousins, October 2, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 70, cl. 820.02: Military Affairs; Department to Erwin, Instruction 353, February 4, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 1, cl. 800: Exiles and Revolutionaries; R.D. Gatewood (U.S. Secretary of Legation to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, may 7, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 2, cl. 820.02 Foreign Activities.

\textsuperscript{55} Nugent to the Secretary of State, October 2, 1941, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 3, Vol. 2, cl. 820.02 Foreign Activities; Erwin to W.L. Taillon (United Fruit Company, January 23, 1941, PR Honduras, Box 70, cl. 820.02: Individual Cases.
than substantial evidence, the idea that the political "outs" were opportunistic and would welcome any alliance of convenience was persuasive enough to establish a link between Liberals and Nazis in Erwin’s mind. More than anything else, the demonization of the Liberal Party cemented the legation’s support for the local regime—acting on the assumption that the choice in Honduras was between a benign traditional dictatorship and an opposition backed by totalitarian allies.

Throughout September, 1943, for example, the Cariás regime was on edge due to an elaborately planned revolution involving Zúñiga Huete’s Liberals, which turned out a spectacular failure. The regime hit back hard against Liberals in the San Pedro Sula area, arresting at random many known Liberals. Interestingly, the American consulates in the area reported, around the same time, that American naval vessels visited the area affected by the revolution and that navy airplanes made overflights of Honduran territory in "a gesture of firm control". While the young consuls seem to have been at a loss to explain the presence of the U.S. navy, Erwin must have known—perhaps even requested—that the U.S. navy was to visit the area. Days before the first ships arrived on the horizon, the minister reported to Washington that the United States should help Carias keep the country stable in the interest of wartime cooperation.56

About one year later, another plot against the government was discovered—this time it did not involve the Liberals but appeared to foreshadow the 1944 revolutions in El Salvador and Guatemala. The men behind the 1943 plot, which involved an attempt on Cariás’ life, were young army officers who were professionally trained abroad (some at the Guatemalan military academy which eventually turned against Ubico), but who did not have any opportunity for advancement in their own country because the old Cariás-men dominated the upper ranks of the army. The plot was uncovered before it was executed because Guatemalan spies picked up rumors and Ubico gave Cariás a timely warning. The result was another wave of arrests, not aimed solely against those directly involved in the plot, but also against the community of Liberal opponents inside the country.57

The American legation was taken completely by surprise. Part of the reason for the oversight was probably the earlier conflict between Erwin and Military Attaché Austin—who had been transferred out of Honduras—since one of the plotters was an old informant of Austin and might have kept the attaché informed had the latter still been at his post. More important, both the government and the legation were obsessed with the Liberal/Nazi threat. As the legation had to admit, the military plot did not involve Liberals

56 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2333, September 18, 1942, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 7, Vol. 6, cl. 800: Honduras; Wymberly DeR. Coerr (U.S. Vice Consul to La Ceiba) to Erwin, October 15, 1942, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 7, Vol. 6, cl. 800: Honduras. La Ceiba; Nugent to Erwin, September 22, 1942, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 7, Vol. 6, cl. 800: Honduras. Puerto Cortes.

57 Paraphrase of Telegram 257 of November 21, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Plot on the life of Carias; Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 591, November 26, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Plot on the life of Carias; Lee M. Hunsacker (U.S. Vice Consul to Puerto Cortes), Memorandum on Rumors Circulating in San Pedro Sula Concerning the Attempt on President Carias’ Life, December 4, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Plot on the life of Carias.
or Nazis—not even Communists! Somewhat shaken by an uprising where none was suspected, Erwin congratulated Carias on his near escape from death. The minister even reassured the President that, had the plot succeeded, the United States would have never recognized the revolutionary regime. Where Erwin got that idea is unclear. The legation’s archives or a history book are the likeliest candidates since the non-recognition policy had been dead for nearly ten years. Not surprisingly, the Department, while expressing its commendation for Erwin’s prompt reporting on the plot, immediately informed its minister that it had no policy of holding back recognition—adding somewhat acidly that Erwin might wish to consult some books on international law.58

The 1943 murder plot, coming from such an unexpected corner, shook up the legation’s evaluation of the opposition. Since the German threat also appeared less formidable in 1943 than it did before, the importance of the Liberal/Nazi connection receded to the background, although Erwin continued to focus on the traditional Liberal opponents of Carias, arguing that the “desire to bring about his downfall is not widespread and is confined to political cliques dominated by disappointed seekers for the presidential office”.59 On the Department’s request, the embassy reported in 1944 that there were no more totalitarian subversive movements in Honduras (either Nazi or Communist). Revolutionary attempts against the President were an “old fashioned Latin American affair”:

As Latin American dictators go, President Carias is fairly good—far better than most, perhaps less enlightened than some. His record should be viewed in perspective, and with regard to local conditions. Most of the people he governs are illegitimate (54.5 percent) and illiterate (74.5 percent). When he assumed office, he was faced with substantially the same problem met and overcome by James I in Scotland and Cardinal Richelieu in France—the establishment and maintenance of order. James I (1394-1437) smashed the semi-independent chiefs (...); Richelieu (1585-1642) smashed the feudal power of the Rohans and Montmorencys; and Carias smashed the guerrilla generals. James and Richelieu fought and beheaded; Carias merely imprisons or exiles. His measures are often arbitrary, and there are occasional cases of personal injustice, but, by and large, the system is fairly sound; like his great predecessors, President Carias will leave this country more civilized and otherwise better off than he found it eleven years ago.60

3. SPRINGTIME IN CENTRAL AMERICA

By January 1944, the middle levels Department of State became aware of the growing opposition against dictatorial regimes in Central America. Although Washington realistically assumed that discontent on the isthmus could lead to changes in the

58 Berle to Erwin, Instruction 1540, December 29, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Revolution. Exiles.
59 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 49, May 13, 1943, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 11, cl. 800: Revolution. Exiles.
60 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1322, August 21, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras, August to December.
leadership in that region, its estimate was that such changes were still a distant eventuality. Considering the reports it received from the embassies in Central America, this was a logical conclusion.

Therefore, a change in policy was not necessary at the time. The Department did counsel its posts to be careful not to get drawn into politics, however:

In view of the particularly delicate situation existing at the moment, the Department wishes to reiterate its injunctions against any avoidable act of omission or commission which might be interpreted as reflecting on the local political situation. Excessive public friendliness toward the Administration in power or the participation of United States officials in pre-administration meetings of a political nature would be [sic.] almost as undesirable as the identification of the Embassy with opposition to the existing Administration. It is to be remembered that there is bitter open and covert opposition to virtually all of the administrations in power; that it is almost inevitable that this opposition will eventually come to power in some countries; and that the rule of non-interference in internal politics applies even to those regimes which, in seeking to perpetuate themselves in power, have gone out of their way to emphasize their friendship for the United States. The respective missions will doubtless find it very difficult to define the line where friendliness toward the government of an allied sister Republic ends and friendliness toward a particular political regime begins, but the Department is confident that they will handle this problem with particular discretion.  

A particularly interesting aspect in the Department’s standpoint is its continued trust in the noninterference principle. As far as local perceptions of American policy were concerned, that policy was dead. The American ambassador could not very well argue that the United States had no interest in local affairs while the War Department delivered tanks; the Sanitation Division built sewers; the Justice Department trained local law enforcement units; the Coordination Committee plastered walls with posters demanding victory for democracy; etc, etc. After three years of total war, the policy that was so successful in the 1930s just did not apply anymore.

Of further interest is that Department believed that Central Americans would accept the philosophical argument that friendliness to a certain government did not equal friendliness to a particular regime. The embassies would learn that this divide was meaningless in practice, but it did allow the officers in the Department to avoid difficult questions. As long as the illusion was entertained that the United States could maintain friendly relations with any government despite changes in the particular regime, the State Department did not have to reevaluate its policy and could continue with business as usual—which, in early 1944, meant the prosecution of the war in Europe and Asia. The Department was confident that its officers on the spot could work within these guidelines, as long as they maintained an attitude of particular discretion. The reality was often different.

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3.1 One down
To his annoyance, Thurston received an official invitation to the inauguration of Martínez’ new term on March [...], just days before the event was to take place. The ambassador knew that this was no simple oversight: the invitations were sent to all foreign diplomats in the capital at the very last minute to prevent them from consulting their own departments. Trouble was brewing in the capital and the presence of the entire diplomatic corps at the inauguration ceremonies could be interpreted as foreign support for Martínez’ continuismo. The absence of any one diplomat would be regarded as a sign of disapproval. To attend or not was, therefore, an important policy decision with potentially far-reaching consequences. Policy—at least when local affairs were concerned—was not the Department’s strong point in this period. Just days after the inauguration, Thurston send the Department a slightly vexed telegram, asking to be held up to date about policy decisions and announcement; as the embassy relied on the American press for that sort of information. It was not just the Department that was negligent, however: reports coming from the embassies in Central America in the previous year painted a picture of stable regimes, despite some rising discontent.62

It was up to Thurston to decide what to do with the invitation, but options were few. Thurston explained to his colleague the Mexican ambassador, who seems to have been willing to snub Martínez, that an ambassador was just an agent and not the maker of policy. In the absence of instructions, Thurston said, the best thing was to follow diplomatic protocol and ceremony so as to prevent insulting the host government and thereby embarking on a new policy. Thus the diplomatic corps polity sat through the inauguration ceremonies, a decision that met the general anger and indignation of oppositionists.63

Martínez’ third term was to be his shortest. On April 2 shooting broke out in San Salvador while the president was in Santa Anna. Initially, things went well for the opposition, which sent two trucks of armed men to Santa Anna to apprehend Martínez. By some inexplicable coincidence or oversight, however, the armed convoy of oppositionists going to Santa Anna passed the armed convoy of the president going to San Salvador without noticing each other. By April 3, Martínez was firmly entrenched in the capital’s police barracks and leading the defense of his government. The opposition was reluctant to bomb Martínez’ position because political prisoners were held at the barracks. By late afternoon, many oppositionists had decided that to save their own skins: the failure to capture or kill Martínez had been very disheartening and many rebel leaders deserted their companions to seek the safety of foreign embassies.

62 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1345, February 29, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 93, cl. 124: Conduct of Office; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-132, March 25, 1944, PR El Salvador, Box 93, cl. 124: Conduct of Office.
63 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1352, March 2, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 800: El Salvador; Gade to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2324, January 4, 1945, PR El Salvador, Box 118, Vol. XVI, cl. 800: El Salvador.
The American embassy had its own brush with revolutionary upheaval when an American lend-lease tank passed in front of the chancery several times, spraying the surrounding streets with machine gun fire while no enemy seemed near. Eventually, the driver of the tank parked his machine on the front lawn of the chancery, disembarked, and applied for political asylum. As it turned out, the tank driver was one Colonel Tito Calvo, the military leader of the revolution. Why he chose the American embassy to apply for asylum is unclear, as the United States did not recognize the right to political asylum. Thurston informed the officer of that fact and also told him that he would have no choice but to hand him over to the authorities. The ambassador also hinted that if Calvo wanted to escape, there would be ample opportunity for him to do so, especially since he had arrived in a tank. It seems that Calvo had lost his nerve however and would not budge from the embassy. A short time later, government troops arrived to take him prisoner, although Thurston managed to extract the unlikely promise that his guest would not be harmed. Some ten days later, the official newspaper reported that the colonel had been executed.

Clearly then, the April revolution was a spectacular failure. Some 500 people lost their lives and an entire city block was destroyed. The failure seems to have been the result of bad planning and coordination, especially between the civilian and the military element of the opposition. The military oppositionists were even divided amongst themselves: Calvo was one of the most hated officers of the army—a former Nazi-sympathizer in the assessment of the embassy—and many officers and soldiers deserted the revolution when they heard who its leader was. But despite the collapse of the April 2 uprising, San Salvadorans did not return to business as usual. The city remained in a state of tension until a new revolt broke out.

In the mean time, the embassy had to come to terms with the April events. While the revolution was an obvious tactical loss for the opposition, the Martínez regime showed some very significant weaknesses. The President had called on Pro Patria and the Guardia to protect him. Both these organizations were considered firm pillars of the regime. Both neglected to come to its aid. So while the government was less secure than anticipated, it also turned out to be less benign than previously thought. While the usual reaction to a failed plot was to punish the ringleaders with relatively short jail sentences, often followed by exile, the April revolt was followed by wholesale torture and execution. The executions only led to more opposition. The soldiers of the Guardia Nacional, who were tasked with the executions, often refused to follow orders. Many of the killings had to be performed with machine guns by higher officers—veterans of the Matanza. The torture and executions also alienated the civilian population. The students of the National University were particularly indignant because many of the young officers who fell victim to Martínez’ vengeance were also part-time students. While the president, due to his active interest in theosophy, was always been regarded as somewhat of an eccentric,
the general consensus after the failed revolution was that he had gone “completely off the deep end”.

For a month, the atmosphere in San Salvador remained dark. Martínez did not show himself in public without heavily armed guards and rumors of executions proliferated. The president obviously failed to restore peace and calm to the city and his severe handling of the uprising only made things worse. To protest the executions specifically and the regime general, a new revolution broke out around the start of May. This time, the cowed and thinned out military faction was hardly involved. The revolution started with a student “strike”, which spread first to the professional groups and later to shopkeepers, railroad workers, etc., gradually paralyzing the city. Remembered as the huelga de los caídos brazos (strike of the broken arms) the protests were a successfully executed campaign of non-violent, passive resistance against state terror. Initially, Martínez tried to strike back by bringing armed peasants to the city. The strain of the past month, however, had been too much for most of his cabinet ministers and advisors, who managed to convince the president not to let the situation escalate. A climax occurred on May 8 when student protesters rejected Martínez proposition to step down after he named a successor. Instead, the students bluntly told Martínez that he was to leave the presidency by 9 A.M. the next day. Amazingly, the president announced his retirement over the national radio on May 9, handing over power to a provisional government under the leadership of minister of Defense Menendez. The opposition, which was not entirely satisfied by Menendez’ appointment, kept up the pressure for some days, until Martínez fled to Guatemala and the interim government announced that it would govern “according to the norms of the most ample democracy, guaranteeing the Four Freedoms proclaimed by Mr. Roosevelt.”

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64 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2023, June 21, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 824: Military Supplies and Equipment; Berle to the U.S> Embassies and Legations in Latin America, March 23, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 824: Military Supplies and Equipment; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1465, April 14, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 824: Military Supplies and Equipment; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1503, April 26, 1944, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 10, cl. 800: El Salvador.

3.2 Two down

The fall of Martínez caused quite a stir in the Guatemalan presidential palace. No one had expected that the neighboring regime might fail. Now that it had happened, doubts arose about the stability of the Guatemalan government. Ubico ordered the press to stop reporting about the Salvadoran revolution and at the same time tried to ingratiate himself with local students and soldiers, a very unusual step for the increasingly reclusive and obstinate dictator. The president’s henchmen, who could be relied upon to serve as astute political “weather vanes”, were getting uneasy. One of Ubico’s right-hand men, General Anzueto, was transferring funds to foreign bank accounts. Frederico Hernández de León, owner of the semi-official newspaper *Nuestro Diario*, put in a good word for the opposition in his editorials—an obvious attempt to spread his bets. Word on the street was that Ubico accepted the political asylum of Martínez, whom he heartily disliked, only because he might find himself in a similar situation in the future. The regime’s self-confidence declined in inverse proportion to the opposition’s rising optimism. Long, however, remained certain that the trouble would be temporary. He believed that events in Salvador only effected a “minority [which was] usually so silent”. Almost two generations older than the typical oppositionist, Long talked disdainfully about the “uneasy youngsters” who normally did not dare raise their voices. The more intelligent Guatemalan, the ambassador believed, would be satisfied with the “more liberal policy” and “reasonable change” that Ubico was now instituting to assuage the people.

Both regime and opposition started to petition the embassy for help. Around the end of June, with rumors of an impending strike increasing, the government issued new directives against subversive Nazi and Fascist elements, but the embassy recognized this as a ploy to “lower the value of the opposition in our eyes”. Meanwhile, Guatemalan students tried to obtain American flags from the embassy for use during a demonstration, explaining that they were enthusiastic supporters of the Atlantic Charter, but they were politely turned down. While students were already marching through the streets, Long reported to the Department that “although this movement may have serious consequences due to its deviation from the general trend of the perfectly-dominated Ubico regime, the situation in no way parallels the recent movement in El Salvador”. Thus the possibility of the overthrow of Ubico was “not considered great at this time”.

It is true, perhaps, that the student parades wouldn’t have caused Ubico’s downfall by themselves, but to Long’s surprise, they did spark demonstrations by a much larger group of Guatemalan citizens, especially after the regime formally suspended the (in fact, Salvador. The single best study on this period is: Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection*, especially 62-79.

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66 Drew, Memorandum for the Files, May 27, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
67 Long to the Secretary of State, despatch 1176, May 30, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1226, June 16, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
68 Long to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase of Telegram, June 22, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; [SC], Memorandum for the Ambassador, June 22, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Maj. Victor R. Rose (U.S. Assistant Military Attaché) to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 1234, June 23, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
non existent) constitutional guarantees and tried to restore order by force. Long now reported that “there is a large and wide-spread body of public opinion hostile to President Ubico, even among those who recognize that he has given the country an efficient and reasonably honest Administration”. As if reporting some entirely novel notion, the ambassador added that Ubico was now being accused of “ruthless suppression of civil liberties and the exercise of despotic repressive measures for his perpetuation in office”.69

Tense days of demonstrations, sit-in strikes, and marches followed, sometimes answered by random shooting and, at one point, a violent outburst of “hoodlums” who had been brought into the city by the government to intimidate the opposition. Long was involved in the conflict as the Acting Dean of the diplomatic corps, which attempted to mediate collectively between the opposition and the regime, but eagerly handed over that function when the Nuncio of the Holy See, and actual Dean, returned from a trip during the demonstrations. Yet, all eyes were constantly focused on the U.S. embassy which managed to make enemies on both sides with its non-intervention attitude. Carlos Salazar, the minister of Foreign Affairs, informed Long with diplomatic bitterness that it was “hard to escape the impression that [the government] was not receiving support, in one form or another, from a country which should be friendly”. On the other hand, many oppositionists felt that the embassy remained silent while people were being shot in the streets, because it was grateful that Ubico had helped expropriate German holdings during the war. The general impression was that the embassy had enough influence with Ubico to at least force him to moderate the violence.70

“Ya no quiero más”, a visibly disheartened Ubico told Long on June 30. Somewhat to the disgust of the American, the *macho* General was “almost to the point of weeping”. Apparently unbeknownst to the embassy, opposition to Ubico’s continuance (under the prevailing conditions, at least) had reached the president’s immediate circle of former supporters. Ubico suggested to Long that General Anzueto might take over the presidency, but Long advised against it, feeling that the general was too closely associated with Ubico and, most importantly, had been under suspicion of being a Fascist sympathizer.71 Thanks to historians who interviewed some of Ubico’s former

69 Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1241, June 23, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
70 Long to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase of Telegram, June 25, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Rose to Military Intelligence Division, Report 1236, June 26, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Paraphrase of Telegram, June 26, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Hull to Long, Paraphrase of Telegram, June 27, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1261, June 27, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1251, June 24, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1256, June 27, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala. In fact, Long did pressure the administration to stop the violence, but only in his role as a member of the Diplomatic Corps. The naval and military attachés appear to have prevented random shooting by security troops at one point, although the details of this event are vague.
71 Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1269, June 30, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Telegram 433, June 30, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box
advisors, it is known how Ubico eventually selected a successor: The Guatemalan army structure was rather top-heavy, counting dozens of generals for an army that could get by on one or two of such officers. Many “surplus” generals, having nothing better to do, gathered every day in the anteroom of Ubico’s office to accept whatever chore the president might have for them, serving, in effect, as very high-ranking errand boys. When Ubico decided to step down and hand over power to the army, one of his advisors walked into the anteroom of the president’s office where, due to the early hour, only three generals had collected to play some cards or exchange the latest gossip. These three, Generals Buenaventura Pineda, Eduardo Villagrán Ariza, and Frederico Ponce Vaides, were appointed the ruling junta of Guatemala on the spot.\textsuperscript{72}

Initially, the transfer of power was greeted as a victory by the opposition—not in the least because the Junta, which was led by General Ponce, declared its intention to organize free and fair elections.\textsuperscript{73} Long, on the other hand, was skeptical. He had not sympathized with the protesters, whom he deemed too young and fanatical to be involved in politics. The very visible role of Guatemalan women in the anti-Government parades annoyed him and his employees most. Later acknowledging his mistake to get involved in local politics, secretary Drew reported that he had lectured a group of oppositionist women who came to the embassy during the demonstrations about the effects of “unnecessary” agitation without a “direct motive”. One of the women showed signs of “mental instability”, according to the officer. Likewise, Long had strongly advised another group of “fanatical women” to stay away from political manifestations. He called their purported willingness to die to get Ubico out “crazy”. When the demonstrations achieved their first goal, the removal of the president, Long commented that “[t]heir willingness to die to secure the removal of Ubico suddenly fell flat, as he resigned without killing any of them. This should have deflated some, but on the contrary chests swelled and hundreds took credit for it”.\textsuperscript{74}

After Ponce’s takeover, the political situation in Guatemala remained tense and Long was not sure what to make of the new political situation. The ambassador initially believed that Ponce would be a middle-of-the-road president who could unite different classes and interest groups under a more liberal government than Guatemala had known before. Besides, the new government appeared to meet all the requirements for recognition under international law and could not be tied to Axis influence. Now 68 years

\textsuperscript{72} Gleijeses, \textit{Shattered Hope}, 26.
\textsuperscript{73} Long to the Secretary of State, Telegram 460, July 1, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
\textsuperscript{74} [WCA], Memorandum for the Ambassador, June 30, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Diary entries of June 26, June 27, and July 1, Long Papers, Box 66, file 334: Guatemalan Diary, 1944. In fact, the Office of the Military Attaché had reported at least 2 dead and 75 wounded during a June 22 demonstration. See Rose to Military Intelligence Division, report 1236, June 26, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.

\textsuperscript{106} cl 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1274, July 1, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Long to Laurence Duggan (Director of the Office of American Republic Affairs), July 4, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala; Diary entries of June 26, June 27, and July 1, Long Papers, Box 66, file 334: Guatemalan Diary, 1944. In fact, the Office of the Military Attaché had reported at least 2 dead and 75 wounded during a June 22 demonstration. See Rose to Military Intelligence Division, report 1236, June 26, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl 800: Guatemala.
old, Long’s optimistic evaluation of Ponce was definitely colored by his disdainful attitude toward the “younger element”, which kept up agitation against the government. The ambassador did not like the student’s noisy parades or their “inappropriate” behavior in the National Assembly, where they shouted comments from the public galleries. At one point, a group of students visited the embassy to demand that the United States help it overthrow Ponce. If help was not forthcoming, they would turn to the Mexican ambassador who had always shown himself a supporter of the opposition. Not inclined to be bullied by youngsters who were “too immature to be taken seriously”, Long reported that he “had only to explain [to the students] our established policy in a fatherly fashion and the interview ended”.75

Events in the following weeks cast doubts over Long’s initial observations, however. First of all, more and more “responsible” and conservative men of Long’s own age and class came forward with criticism of the Ponce regime. Ponce himself began to harbor plans to continue his rule and stepped up repression against critics. Around mid-September a prominent newspaperman was shot and killed in front of his home by government toughs. While the embassy considered his newspaper “moderate”, the regime regarded it as too critical. Even more upsetting was Ponce’s tactic of hauling Indians “of known fighting qualities” to the capital to intimidate opponents. According to Long, the government had made dangerous “socialistic” promises to the Indians in return for their support.76

Throughout, the embassy did its best to maintain an appearance of nonintervention. After the assassination of Cordova, for example, Long cabled General Brett, Commander of the U.S. Special Service Squadron in Panama, to cancel the latter’s planned visit to Guatemala: “It was felt that anything that might conceivably be construed in the public mind as approval of, or even indifference to, anything in the nature of political assassination should be avoided”. Such modest steps were hardly adequate to influence public opinion, however. “On all sides one hears the remark”, the embassy’s [legal attaché] reported, “How can the United States continue to recognize an

75 Long to Laurence Duggan (Director of the Office of American Republics), July 4, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Telegram 474, July 5, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1308, July 14, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1309, July 14, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1428, August 15, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1564, September 25, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Mexico.

76 Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1546, September 19, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1553, September 22, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1554, September 22, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1555, September 22, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1560, September 25, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1574, September 29, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 106, cl. 800: Guatemala; Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1594, October 3, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued).
unconstitutional government by assassins in their own hemisphere when hundreds of thousands of their best men are dying to fight it elsewhere".\textsuperscript{77}

Despite his disregard for physical hardships, Long put in a request for sick leave in September, 1944. Some sort of “bug” had him down, he explained in a personal letter to president Roosevelt. “Bugs”, probably referring to some sort of infection to the intestines, were the nemesis for many Americans who stayed in Guatemala for extended periods of time. They had immobilized Des Portes and Cabot for some time too. It wasn’t surprising that they should get the best of the aging ambassador. In a note to Norman Armour, Long explained that he could safely leave the embassy at this time because, in his assessment, the real strain, “if any”, would come just before the elections in December. And since many people were contacting the embassy to plead for support during the campaigning season, the ambassador’s absence might actually be beneficial in the light of the non-intervention principle. Because the embassy’s most experienced officer had been transferred to Algiers a short time before, Long left his post to the charge of young William Affeld.\textsuperscript{78}

On October 20, as Affeld made ready to celebrate his birthday, heavy fighting broke out in Guatemala City. After having restrained his son from joining the revolutionaries with his toy pistol, the young chargé was almost immediately drawn into conflict by both sides. Ponce called the embassy to ask for fresh ammunition, which Affeld refused, and later that day a revolutionary Junta appeared on the front step of the Embassy with a request to use the embassy’s telegraph to communicate the terms of surrender to the government, a request that was granted by the chargé. Although very intense, fighting in the capital was over quickly. The Ponce government capitulated some 12 hours after the start of the revolution. While the military faction that led the revolution had armed many volunteers from the civilian population, the relatively swift victory was mainly due to involvement on the side of the rebels of the presidential honor guard—the only army division armed with tanks and other heavy weapons, courtesy of the lend-lease program. The Department later commended Affeld for having enabled the government and the revolutionaries to negotiate the terms of surrender, which ensured a quick end to hostilities. This was the primary short-term objective for the Department, considering the importance of peace and stability in the Hemisphere during the war.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{77} Long to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1594, October 3, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Major Victor R. Rose (U.S. Assistant Military Attaché to Guatemala) to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 1324-44, October 3, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued).

\textsuperscript{78} Cabot to Long, August 8, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 98, cl. 123D: Officers: Drew; [Howland Shaw] to Long, February 19, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 98, cl. 123D: Officers: Long; Norman Armour (Acting Director of the Division of American Republic Affairs), October 10, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 98, cl. 123D: Officers: Long; Long to Armour, October 14, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 98, cl. 123D: Officers: Long.

\textsuperscript{79} William C. Affeld (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to Guatemala), Memorandum starting with “Was awakened by gunfire…”, n.d. (October , 1944), PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Colonel Fred T. Cruse (U.S. Military Attaché to Guatemala), Memorandum, October
How the new Guatemalan regime would fit into the post-war objectives of the United States was, of course, a different question. For the moment however, the State Department was not overly concerned with the end of the Ubico era.

3.3 Two to go

Up to 1944, Central America was ruled by four caudillos and one fairly liberal regime in Costa Rica. With the fall of Martínez and Ubico, the demand rose among oppositionists in all countries to eliminate caudillismo from the isthmus entirely. The two remaining dictators were Tubircio Carías in Honduras and Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Both proved more resilient than their northern neighbors. Somoza, the most junior caudillo and a brilliant political tactician, hung on by his fingernails. Throughout the late forties, he employed conciliatory and violent measures to divide and defeat his opponents. Carías, now the most senior caudillo, never had to face the kind of powerful opponents that Somoza did and managed to maintain his presidency until 1948.

Several attempts were made against the Carías regime throughout 1944. One front of opposition was the exiled community. After the fall of Martínez, Honduran exiles “flocked” to El Salvador and it seems that even Somoza, who for a while thought that Carías’ days were numbered and he might as well get on the good side of his opponents, allowed Honduran exiles to organize in Nicaragua. Thus the exiles had direct access to the Honduran border for the first time in many years and made the most of the opportunity by lounging several armed excursions into the country from bases in Salvador and Nicaragua. Internal opposition, inspired by wartime propaganda and the fall of Martínez and Ubico, was also on the rise. Major protests were organized in the urban centers of Tegucigalpa and especially San Pedro Sula—which was an old Liberal bulwark and a traditional center of opposition against Carías.

20, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Affeld, Memorandum starting with “The representatives of the Government...”, n.d. (October, 1944), PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Affeld, Memorandum starting with “At 10:30 A.M. J.H. Wilson, Jr...”, n.d. (October, 1944), PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Affeld to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1658, October 23, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Affeld to Gerald A. Drew (American Embassy, Paris), November 1, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 107, cl. 800: Guatemala (Continued); Unsigned letter (Department of State) to Affeld, November 17, 1944, PR Guatemala, Box 98, cl. 123D: Officers.

80 Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1710, June 12, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1722, June 15, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1728, June 16, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1735, June 17, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1743, June 20, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Thurston to the Secretary of State, Despatch 1856, July 24, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 8, cl. 800: Honduras. Salvadoran Attitude; Norman Armour, Memorandum of Conversation with the Honduran Ambassador, December 13, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras: August to December.

81 Although mostly too specialized to be of use to the current text, an excellent study on San Pedro Sula’s role in Honduran socio-economic development is: Darío A. Euraque, Reinterpreting
Chapter 7

Interestingly, representatives of the American military in Central America also felt confident enough to express their anti-dictatorial standpoints after the fall of Martínez and Ubico. General George Brett, commander of the Caribbean Defense Command and the Army’s Panama Canal Department, conveyed his determination to avoid any action to “help the dictator Carías”, provoking Erwin to denounce the General’s “lack of judgment” and “bad taste”. Military attaché Smith told Erwin that “we cannot have a democracy in Guatemala and a dictatorship over here [in Honduras]”. The former’s assistants were reporting to their department that the dictatorships in Central America were planning to destroy the new democracies. Again, Erwin was livid, claiming that the military men allowed themselves to be misled by the “pseudo-democratic” opponents of Carías and instructing the State Department to ignore such reports, as Carías’ only wish was to be left alone.83

Carías’ wish was not granted. Aside from several rebel incursions, which caused some alarm in the Presidential Palace but generally turned out to be ineffective, Honduras’ tiny middle class was stirring. July 1944 witnessed demonstrations by women, students, and professionals very similar to those in Salvador and Guatemala. According to embassy observers, the demonstrators used slogans such as “¡Viva la democracia!”; “¡Viva la libertad!”, and “¡Viva Presidente Roosevelt!”, demonstrating the effects of wartime propaganda, but leaving the embassy unimpressed. Rather than democratic ideals, the embassy believed that the crowds in Honduras were motivated by guaro: a local liquor, “one drink of which is said to embolden a rabbit to fight a bulldog”. Carías managed to sit out the protests by a combination of conciliation, a refusal to be provoked, and downright terror. Instead of the army or the police, which were kept away from the demonstrators to prevent incidents, unofficial militias roamed the streets, led by Carías nephew Calixto who, according to old legation reports, was many times a rapist and killer.85

More serious protests, with graver consequences, were held in San Pedro Sula. Oppositionists there obtained a permit to demonstrate around the beginning of July, either because they had tricked the authorities into believing that it would be a parade in honor of American Independence Day, or because the government hoped that the city would quiet down after blowing off some steam. As it was, both sides were intent not to provoke the other. Carías had sent minister of Defense Galvez to San Pedro Sula to make sure that no rash actions were undertaken by either the local commandante or the oppositionists. But whatever Galvez’ exact role in the following events was, his mission


82 Erwin, Memorandum for the Files, December 13, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 21, Vol. 12, cl. 824: Lend Lease.
83 Erwin to the Secretary of State, December 26, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras: August to December.
84 Erwin to the Secretary of State, July 7, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800: Honduras: August to December.
85 Higgins to the Secretary of State, Despatch 944, November 3, 1933, PR Honduras (SCF) Vol. 218.
was a failure. During the demonstration which took place on July 6, some sort of incident took place which provoked either a soldier, a demonstrator, or perhaps even an entirely unrelated person to fire his pistol. Thinking that the demonstration had turned violent, soldiers stationed nearby opened fire: “The firing, from both rifles and sub-machine guns, lasted from 8 to 10 minutes. There were no means of escape; alleys leading off the main street were blocked by armed soldiers who fired on any and all that attempted to escape (...) Twenty-two, consisting of men, women and children, are said to have been slain before the firing ceased and scores wounded”.86

Typically, the embassy did not report on the details of this incident. Such matters were apparently regarded as an inappropriate subject for political reports. Thus, for a sense of the brutish reality of the slaughter in San Pedro Sula, one has to consult the eye-witness accounts collected by the nearby American vice consulate:

…a young lady of about 22 years of age, was literally sawed in two by sub-machine gun fire. When the firing ceased, one of the soldiers rushed up to the girl, [illegible] her of two rings, a small money bag and a necklace, lifted up her dress and, in a most coarse manner, spoke of her legs and the probabilities of her virginity. Another eye-witnessed story was told by a doctor who, upon learning of this outrageous slaughter, rushed to Hospital El Norte to help receive the wounded. He related that dump trucks were delivering the victims in an unbelievably heathenish fashion. The trucks drove up to the hospital, backed to the receiving door and with hydraulic dump truck lifters, dumped the victims to the ground. The doctor frantically enquired as to why they were using such a barbaric method and was bluntly informed by the drivers that they had so many to move off the streets that they had no time for courteousness. When the doctor stated to the drivers that they were hastening the deaths of the wounded, he was met with a disinterested shrug of the shoulders. These are but two of many stomach-turning happenings as told to me by actual witnesses.87

While the State Department seems not to have been aware of the exact details of the events in San Pedro Sula, Erwin was—or at least could have been. He took the position that a formal diplomatic protest, an action suggested to him by the British chargé, would constitute “intervention”. While the killing of unarmed civilians was “unfortunate”, no British or American citizens were involved. Somewhat more darkly, Erwin reminded the chargé that “rioting and illegal parading had been suppressed on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C. a few years ago by Federal Soldiers (the so-called bonus marches) with several casualties; that killings had occurred in Ireland, India and other British possessions in an effort to ‘maintain order’”88

87 Idem.
88 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2042, July 26, 1944, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 19, Vol. 7, cl. 800. July Disturbances.
4. DOORS OPENED AND DOORS CLOSED

December 1944 found the State Department’s division for American Republic Affairs in an apologetic frame of mind. While the Department continued to uphold the Good Neighbor policy—which, it was widely believed, had created the conditions in which an inter-American alliance against Fascism could be formed—it was also aware of many new problems that had to be addressed. High on the list was what the Department defined as the “support democracy vs. nonintervention theses”: the opposing demands that the United States should both support a liberalization of politics in the south and at the same time continue its policy of not interfering in local politics. A Departmental memo to Assistant Secretary Nelson Rockefeller noted that, on the one had, Latin American dictators were dissatisfied because the United States had intervened by introducing democratic ideals to the region but had refused to intervene to help keep failing dictators in power. On the other had, the Department recognized, the opposition and “the masses” in Latin America were disillusioned with the United States because it had provided lend lease aid, money, and other types of support to the dictators during the war. These people now demanded to know why the United States had not actively supported democracy on the American continent, as it had purported to do in Asia and Europe. In the Department’s own assessment, wartime policy was wise and prudent considering that the United States had had to walk an extremely thin line between two evils:

We were bound by solemn obligation not to intervene. But in any case, it would have been monstrous to have given the dictators active support against the people. It would have been folly to have aided the alleged democratic elements against constituted governments; at best this would have resulted in chaos at a crucial moment, and it might well have furnished the enemy a foothold in this hemisphere.89

In the Department’s estimate, therefore, the policy of nonintervention proved its usefulness during the war. But many Central Americans did not share this view. On the one hand, they witnessed the close cooperation between the United States and the local regimes during the war. The dictatorships made sure to advertise every aspect of such cooperation and presented themselves as highly-valued, irreplaceable friends of the powerful Americans. The American embassies tended to ignore entreaties by opposition groups while modern lend-lease weapons were delivered for use of the government. At the same time, pro-democratic propaganda spread throughout the isthmus while the United States seemed to demonstrate a very real concern for the lot of the common man in Central America with programs to build roads, hospitals, and schools. These actions made sense from the perspective of fighting a total war on a global scale. In the Central American context, they made no sense at all. The only obvious fact for local observers was that the United States was intervening. On who’s behalf was a matter of confusion.

The existence of middle class, urban opposition to the isthmian dictatorships went unacknowledged by the American embassies for a long time. When this new group

89 Cabot to Rockefeller, Memorandum on Certain Unfavorable Factors in our inter-American Relations, December 13, 1944, Lot Files, General Memoranda, Box 9, folder marked November to December, 1944.
finally came out into the open, it was almost impossible for its members to strike up an intelligible dialogue with the Americans. The embassies were unable to accurately assess the strength of the new opposition; unable to appraise its devotion to the democratic principles of the war; and unable (or unwilling) to understand its arguments about the United States’ moral obligation to help it. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the democratic movements of Central America and the United States never became close, despite a shared political ideology. Some members of the American Foreign service tried to correct this situation after 1945, but their task was made very difficult by the mutual misunderstandings that existed from the start.