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Chapter 9

THE MIDDLE MEN
The Cold War comes to Central America, 1947-1954

Sing a song of quetzals, pockets full of peace!
The junta's in the palace, they've taken out a lease.

The Commies are in hiding, just across the street;
To the embassy of Mexico they beat a quick retreat.

And pistol-packing Peurifoy looks mighty optimistic;
For the land of Guatemala is no longer Communist.

~ Betty Jane Peurifoy, 1954

The “ten years of spring”, as the Guatemalan experiment with liberal government is known, started out under the sympathetic observance of gentle Ambassador Edwin Kyle and ended with the active intervention of Ambassador John Peurifoy—or “pistol-packing Peurifoy”, undoubtedly one of the more unusual men in the Foreign Service. Peurifoy’s appointment to Guatemala by the Eisenhower administration signaled the end of an era: the appointment of the dynamic and thoroughly anti-communist ambassador was a clear indication that the Eisenhower government disapproved of Guatemala’s social and political experiments and intended to do something about it. Indeed, Peurifoy was selected for that particular post because he was thought to have the right qualifications to coordinate the coup that Eisenhower was planning against the Guatemalan government. And Peurifoy was not alone: in fact, the new administration also replaced the supposedly placid ambassadors in Honduras and El Salvador with proven cold warriors. Only Thomas Whelan, also a thorough anticommunist and a good friend of Anastasio Somoza, was allowed to remain in Nicaragua for much of the 1950s. Thus, Peurifoy’s appointment spelled the end of the nonintervention principle and extended the front of the Cold War to Central America. Eisenhower’s direct interference with the appointment of envoys to Central America are indications both of the more direct executive control over American foreign policy during the Cold War and of the importance that the new administration ascribed to the ideological inclinations and practical methods of its individual ambassadors.

As for Peurifoy, he had a grand time in Guatemala. His task was to coordinate the CIA coup against Arbenz, Arévalo’s successor, in Guatemala City in 1954—a task that he executed with abandon. At one point, the ambassador guided a group of perplexed American journalists through Guatemala City waving a pistol while bombs dropped on all

1 “People”, Time Magazine (July 6, 1954).

~ The Middle Men ~
sides. Only Peurifoy knew that the bombardments and coup were mainly a CIA-orchestrated show—neither he nor the journalists he was leading around were in any real physical danger. If only in personal style, Peurifoy could hardly have been more different from the diplomats of the Good Neighbor era. It is somehow fitting that this study on the perceptions of individual American diplomats should end with the appointment of a man of his character. If nothing else, it indicated that the era of Good Neighborliness, for all its inconsistencies, had definitely come to an end. For the next years at least, both Washington and its embassies in Central America believed themselves to be in the midst of a life-and-death struggle against Soviet communism.

1. A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

The question of when the Cold War “started” has occupied many historians. It could be said that the conflict became manifest in March 1947, when Harry Truman announced that the United States would send economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey to prevent those countries from falling prey to Soviet machinations. But had an open clash between east and west been inevitable before that time? Were the United States and the Soviet Union set on a collision course as far back as 1917? The question of when the Cold War “came” to Central America would be equally difficult to answer. The 1954 CIA coup in Guatemala definitively set the tone for the next decennia, but “red scares” followed by violent suppression, which sometimes involved the United States, went as far back as the 1920s.

Historian Melvin Leffler found a straightforward answer to the larger question of when the Cold War started—or at least became inevitable. Before the Second World War, he argues, an ideological conflict existed between capitalist America and communist Russia, but the two were still able to work together if it suited their common interests—the alliance during the World War being an obvious example. Thus, ideological differences are a necessary, but in themselves not sufficient explanation for the Cold War. Only when the spheres of influence of the United States and the Soviet Union came to overlap in Central Europe as a direct consequence of the War did ideological differences combine with the realities of power politics to produce the conflict known as the Cold War.²

In the case of U.S. Latin American policy, historians have found hints of a “first” Cold War or of a tradition of “containing” labor activity and economic nationalism in the region dating back to the early 20th century.³ Also, the purported American support for anti-communist dictators is supposed to form a connection between pre-War and Cold War policies. It is undeniable, of course, that American diplomats in the pre-War period shared their disdain for the (Indian) lower classes with the local aristocracy and were

occasionally swept along in the hysteria of local red scares. But to argue that this situation should be defined in terms of a “war” or that it was somehow akin to the later Cold War, that latter term has to be stretched to include any signs of class or racial antagonism. As long as indigenous communism or radicalism was not combined with the outside threat of a rival superpower, the United States was still able to transcend its inordinate fear of social revolutions and work with local forces as they were. The early Good Neighbor policy is one example, while Braden’s diplomacy implied a tolerance for local change and social experimentation that was unthinkable ten years later. Only when the Soviet Union was widely perceived to be a direct threat in Latin America did old prejudices combine with real power politics to reproduce the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere. This happened some years after superpower rivalry had become a fact of life in Europe and Asia.

Historical studies that emphasize the parallels between 1930s diplomacy and Cold War diplomacy tend to downplay the importance of the intervening World War. The War introduced new concepts, such as the “fifth column” threat, and new procedures, such as the development of “fifth column” capabilities in the form of intelligence agencies, that would come to characterize the Cold War period. As far as U.S. Latin American policy was concerned however, the Cold War did not seamlessly follow the World War. Towards 1945, there was the question of what kind of superpower the United States would be. Would it spread its own economic system and political culture or merely prevent the spread of totalitarian ideologies? Since Washington quickly became preoccupied with Soviet threats in Europe and Asia, the Division of American Republic Affairs under Spruille Braden enjoyed enough leeway to experiment with the first variant. The spread of communism was not considered a major concern at that time. However, a local backlash against liberal experiments combined with bad policy definition and execution on the American side closed that particular route.

There was no way back to the situation that had existed before the War either: the principle of nonintervention was thoroughly perverted during the fight against the fifth column in Latin America. New American agencies meddled in everything from sewer building to military training. The diplomatic corps itself took on a new role in the management of American assistance programs and in the sphere of political defense against ideological threats. The self-imposed limits of the Good Neighbor policy were most definitely a thing of the past, even if the term itself continued to be used. On the Central American side, the age of the traditional caudillos came to an end. Even where they were succeeded by military regimes that appeared superficially similar, training under U.S. supervision during and after the War had imbued the local armies with a new sense of professional mystique, which, in combination with older military traditions on the isthmus, was “anti-political” and devoted to national “progress”.4

Roughly between 1948 and 1953, the political leaders of Washington together with the Europeanist professionals in the State Department extended their influence over the definition of Latin American policy. Initially, the developing “culture” of the Cold War had

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4 See pages 315-316 below.
little effect on the embassies. It could be argued, though, that the general shift to the
right in the political thinking of both Central America and Washington left its marks in
political reports: Political groups that were earlier defined as “liberal” came to be
regarded as “leftist” while “reactionaries” were now dubbed “conservatives”. A most
illustrative internal memo, dated December 31, 1948, can be found in the archives of the
embassy in El Salvador. Analyzing the political factions that made up a military junta at
the time, someone at the embassy decided to redact the political labels that were used
in the original memo:

The danger of a split in the Junta is based now largely upon a conflict
between the conservative moderate element led by Osorio and the liberal
leftist element led by Cordova.\(^5\)

For the time being, however, the region was assumed to be safe from Soviet threats
because it was not “modern” enough to be susceptible to communism; because it was
physically separated from the front lines of the Cold War by two oceans; and because
U.S. influence was considered to be so large there.\(^6\)

While the American policy toward Guatemala after 1948 exemplified Cold War
thinking, the political reporting from El Salvador presents a more representative picture
of the shift to the political right that was taking place within Central America. Around
1948, the American ambassador, Albert Nufer, noted a shift to the political right in El
Salvador. Even mild critique on the country’s social structure was now regarded as a
mark of communism and “many of the reported communists or fellow travelers in El
Salvador would probably be considered merely left of center in other countries.”\(^7\) Even
traditional bastions of conservatism, such as the Catholic Church, were not free from
suspicion: An edict by the Salvadoran Bishop that took note of the “disproportionate”
declare in the allocation of wealth in the country so incensed the coffee barons that they
accused the Church of “aligning” with communism.\(^8\) In this context, former President
Aguirre, whose recognition by the United States was met with general anger and
disappointment in El Salvador a few years earlier, was now making a comeback:

It appears to be quite likely now that Colonel Aguirre will be supported by
many persons who in 1944 repudiated him as a totalitarian-type dictator.
With his famous record in the suppression of El Salvador’s “communist”
uprising in 1932, Colonel Aguirre can probably make today, a most
respectable appeal as a veteran in the currently popular anti-communist
crusade.\(^9\)

\(^5\) Williams, Memorandum on Dangers of Split in Junta, December 31, 1948, PR El Salvador
(SCF), cl. 800: Salvador, September to October.
\(^6\) Stephen Rabe, Eisenhower and Latin America. The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism
\(^7\) Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 162, April 30, 1948, PR El Salvador (SFC), Box 15, cl.
800: Salvador.
\(^8\) Nufer to the Department of State, Despatch 201, June 3, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15,
c1. 800: Salvador.
\(^9\) Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 348, August 19, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15,
c1. 800: Salvador.
While Nufer did not remain unaffected by the anti-communist milieu in El Salvador, he was skeptical about the acuteness of the threat from the left. Recognizing that most supposed “communists” were actually only somewhat left of center, the Ambassador also reported that conservative politicians were using the growing red scare to enhance their own popularity. Building on his anticommunist credentials, Aguirre and his supporters were known to spread rumors about sinister communist plots. President Castañeda, who was considering “reelection”, also encouraged existing fears for the communist specter in the hope that the upper classes would seek the protection of a “law and order” regime.\(^\text{10}\)

What this vignette of American reporting on Salvadoran politics suggests is that local politics were undergoing significant changes well before the local embassy was in the grip of the Cold War. This is not to say that U.S. Cold War policies had no effect on the local situation. Doubtlessly, reactionary groups in El Salvador felt encouraged by anti-Communist rhetoric emanating from Washington or by contacts with other American agencies such as the CIA or the Army. But as far as the late 1940s are concerned, it appears that most Foreign Service officers felt that Central American politics had taken a sharp turn to the right. While this made some conservative politicians appear moderate and some left-leaning politicians seem radical by comparison, the Foreign Service perceived a need for moderation.

### 2. Going Down the Middle of the Road

The introduction of communism or “leftist” ideologies in the political mix lead to a reevaluation of local political actors by American diplomats: Parties and people who would have been considered conservative or even reactionary some years earlier, were now considered quite acceptable. In fact, with the memories of the fascist danger still rather fresh in the memory and new dangers looming on the political left, American diplomats developed a definite preference for the so-called “middle-of-the-road”. Much like in the 1930s, when American diplomats had preferred leaders who could protect their countries against anarchy and social upheaval without reverting to out-and-out dictatorship—a preference which led to initial support for men like Ubico and Carías—the diplomats of the late 1940s supported men who were assumed to hold the middle between the extremes of reaction and communism.

#### 2.1 The extremes: Nicaragua and Guatemala

The Department’s attempt to dislodge Somoza from power using non-recognition turned out to be a failure. The explanation for the American defeat in this case is basically similar to the explanation for Martínez’ successful defiance in the early 1930s: Within the

\(^{10}\) Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 173, May 6, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-91, April 16, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 389, September 30, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 368, September 9, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 16, cl. 800.B: Communism.
confines of his own private hacienda, as Nicaragua was sometimes called, Somoza was just too powerful to be threatened by mere diplomatic action against him. On May 30, 1948, the United States reestablished diplomatic relations with the regime of General Somoza.

The fact that Washington and Managua were back on speaking terms did not imply that all was well between the two. The Department’s attitude toward Somoza remained cool for some time after the non-recognition debacle. Meanwhile, the attitude of the General himself was anything but cool. The Nicaraguan delegates to the OAS and the UN consistently and unconditionally supported American propositions and Somoza was one of the few Latin American leaders who warmly welcomed American action in Korea, promising to send troops to that theatre if the United States so desired. Additionally, an economic upturn during the late 1940s caused Nicaragua to be relatively prosperous and stable. This situation somewhat obscured the authoritarian nature of the local regime, which was characterized by rather extreme graft and nepotism and did not recoil from violence in times of violence. The American ambassador to Nicaragua in the early 1950s, Thomas Whelan, a political appointee of the Truman administration, was so taken in with Somoza that he told his superiors that, “despite the widespread impression to the contrary”, the General was not “a dictator in the true sense of the word”.11

Aside from his developing friendship with Whelan, a friendship that would last some ten years, Somoza scored some other minor victories throughout Truman’s second administration. Around 1952, Somoza apparently managed to convince the CIA to send him weapons, which he would use to topple the left-leaning Arbenz government in Guatemala. However, the operation, known as FORTUNE, was killed by the State Department, which found out about it at the last moment. During the same year, the General also managed to impose himself on Truman, leading to an unofficial lunch appointment at the Whitehouse. But taken over the whole, the Department kept Somoza at arm’s length, consistently refusing to reestablish a military mission and arms deliveries to Nicaragua. Even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who came in with the Eisenhower administration in 1953, initially worried that his plans to fight communism in Latin America were only supported by “the Somozas” of the hemisphere. Only after the 1954 CIA coup against Arbenz, in which Somoza managed to play a leading role, did the General become persona grata in Washington.

While the Department remained careful to dissociate itself from the most reactionary leaders of the hemisphere, relations with one of the most progressive governments, that of Guatemala, soured. Patterson’s transfer from communist Yugoslavia to Guatemala was one indication of Washington’s growing concern about labor activity and social legislation in that country. For the moment, however, the Truman administration believed that the Western hemisphere was relatively safe from communist

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infiltration and Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs Edward Miller carelessly blamed the social revolution in Guatemala on President Árévalo, who was a “wooly head”. Indeed, it would appear that the State Department hoped that some carefully applied outside pressure, combined with the supposedly inherent weakness of Árévalo’s policies, would eventually lead to the end of social experimentation in Guatemala.

In 1950 Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was elected to the Guatemalan presidency. Initially, the Department believed that Arbenz would at least slow down the tempo of social change, because he was an army man and a landowner. However, Arbenz was one of the original leaders of the Guatemalan revolution and, if anything, felt that Árévalo’s policies on land reform had not gone far enough. While Árévalo had distributed land formerly belonging to German landlords, Arbenz openly prepared to nationalize and redistribute fallow lands of other large landowners, including that of the American United Fruit Company. While it was not Washington’s primary objective to protect UFCO’s interests, Guatemalan threats against American interests were taken to be an indication of Guatemala’s flirtations with communism. Therefore, the Department stepped up the pressure against the Central American republic by discontinuing financial aid for the construction of the Guatemalan section of the inter-American highway and by stopping arms deliveries to the Guatemalan army. In the words of U.S. Ambassador Rudolf Emil Schoenfeld, the purpose of these actions was:

…to bring the Guatemalans to the realization that they were dependent upon the United States and that if they expected assistance or consideration from the United States it behooved them to adjust their actions vis-à-vis the United States accordingly.

But even though agencies such as the CIA appeared ready to act against Arbenz, the Department under Truman went no further than this—as the killing of operation FORTUNE indicates. Only after Eisenhower settled in the White House did this situation change.

A good illustration of Department perceptions of Central America is a good-will trip to the region by the Assistant Secretary Miller. The trip was very carefully planned and considered in the Department, because every move Miller made was going to be interpreted as a sign of support or opposition by local political factions. Since all regimes in Central America were of a different political color, the amount of time spent in each of these nations was probably going to be interpreted as an American mark of approval or disapproval for the particular brand of government in that country. Even more important was the question of where Miller would celebrate the Fourth of July, as that holiday would coincide with his trip to Central America. Due to the special place this day occupied in the celebration of American history and values, the presence of a high-placed American officer like Miller in one of the Central American capitals during the Fourth of July would give off some of the brilliance of American power and prestige on the local regime.

Somoza was dying to have Miller visit Managua on Independence Day. The Nicaraguan ambassador to Washington, Dr. Sevilla Sacasa, made a point of visiting the Department during the preparations of Miller’s trip to spread the Somocista gospel. He
was politely received, but his eulogies left the Americans unimpressed. Under the sardonic heading “The happy people”, Miller recounts how Sevilla Sacasa “waxed lyrical over the recent elections in Nicaragua”, which confirmed Somoza’s power, …and the prosperity at home and peace abroad which he foresees as their inevitable results. He described the people of Nicaragua as being filled with alegría [joy] both during and after balloting, to the extent that their enthusiasm had erupted in a nation-wide celebration. He declared that Nicaraguan democracy and elections are not to be compared with those of other states; but an objective analysis in the light of Nicaraguan history, traditions and current conditions would undoubtedly prove that Nicaraguan elections are fully the equal of those of (...) other countries. The tone of this memorandum of conversation alone demonstrates that the Department was exasperated with the Ambassador’s pipedreams. In any event, no one was willing to associate the Fourth of July with the transparent charade that Somoza was performing for the benefit of the yanquis.

A logical choice—at first sight—was for Miller to celebrate the Fourth of July in Guatemala. That, at least, was the largest and arguably most influential country of the region. Some years earlier Spruille Braden had visited Guatemala City on the occasion of Arévalo’s inauguration to indicate American satisfaction with the liberal experiment in that country. But times had changed. The new American ambassador in Guatemala, Richard C. Patterson Jr., vehemently objected to any hint that Miller would even visit the country. Patterson claimed that such a visit could only be an “appeasement mission”. The Department did not agree with Patterson’s alarmist views, but did consider it wise to limit the length of Miller’s visit to Guatemala and his exposure to the local government. By the early 1950s, the Department had come to consider the Arévalo government as too radical and did not want Miller’s visit to Guatemala to convey the impression that “all is well in our relations”. In fact, presidential elections were just around the corner in Guatemala, so this was a particularly bad time to put a stamp of approval on Arévalo’s reformism. Hence the visit to Guatemala would be low-profile: “turkey to be talked with the President and the call on the Foreign Minister to be pure protocol”.13

To the Department, Somoza and Arévalo represented two extremes. Both leaders presented their governments as democratic, but both were flawed in the eyes of Washington. Somoza was obviously reactionary, but Arévalo was too radical for comfort. Neither regime was a good translation of American values to the Central American situation—which is what Miller’s choice of location for the Fourth of July was supposed to convey. Instead, except from “Tegucigalpa which will already have been visited, San Salvador, barring political troubles, would be the best place to spend the 4th of July with its celebrations. It would be preferable to be there rather than in either Managua or

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12 Miller, Memorandum of Conversation with Ambassador Sevilla Sacassa of Nicaragua, May 19, 1950, Lot Files, Office of Middle American Affairs (Entry 1144), Subject File, Box 2, Folder marked Memoranda, January to June, 1950.
13 Bennett to Mann, Barber, and Miller, May 18, 1950, Lot Files, Entry 1144 , Box 2, Folder marked Memoranda, January to June, 1950.
Guatemala”. At this time, El Salvador was no longer ruled by Castañeda. Having survived in office much longer than might have been expected, the President confused lack of active opposition with a position of power and had concurrently attempted to continue himself in office in the 1930s tradition. This act, of course, provided the different factions that had grudgingly accepted his rule with a good reason and justification to rebel. Presenting themselves as guarantors of the Salvadoran constitution, a faction of young, professional army officers took control of the state after an almost bloodless coup in December 1949. Being neither liberal nor reactionary and neither lower class nor aristocratic, the military faction that came to power presented itself as middle-of-the-road. It rejected Somocista dictatorship, but had little sympathy for social experiments of the Guatemalan type. It pronounced a fundamental need for democratic, economic, and social change and progress, but slowly. By 1950, this was exactly what the Department had in mind for its southern neighbors. Careful, responsible, and evolutionary progress was the way to go if the isthmian republics wanted to follow the path that the United States had taken after 1776.

2.2 The middle of the road in Honduras

In 1948, the Carías regime engineered the election of Galvez and Lozano to executive power. Both men were widely recognized as talented and relatively honest administrators. Lozano especially had long been regarded by American envoys as the brains behind Carías’ successful, conservative financial policy. So Carías left his country with the most professional, capable, and honest administrators his Party had on offer (which is not, of course, to say that they were entirely professional, capable, and honest).

Aside from the inherent merits of the Galvez-Lozano ticket, which was particularly attractive to the influential commercial classes because it promised six more years of predictable administration, the successful transfer of power was doubtlessly aided by a favorable economic climate, skillful—though not too blatant—manipulation of the election results, and the weakness of the Liberal Party. With regard to the latter factor, Angel Zúñiga Huete managed to capture the presidential nomination of his divided Party in 1947. Therefore, the Liberal ticket was nothing more than a—in the words of the American embassy—sixteen year old, warmed over dish, since Zúñiga Huete had been the Liberal presidential candidate in every campaign, free or otherwise, since the early 1930s. While of a different political color than Carías, he represented the same 1930s caudillo politics. And while Galvez’ reputation was tinged by his presence at (if not, perhaps, role in) the 1944 San Pedro Sula massacre, Zuniga Huete was remembered (accurately or otherwise) for personally “machine-gunning” Carías-voters in the streets of Tegucigalpa in 1923. Eventually, Zúñiga Huete did not even bother to measure himself against the administration: in true 1930s style, he denounced the government for

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14 Bennett to Mann and Hughes, April 19, 1950, Lot Files, Entry 1144, Box 2, Folder marked Memoranda, January to June, 1950.
15 See chapter 2, page 93.
imposition even before voting started; called for a revolution; and went into hiding. While this meant that Galvez would be "elected" unopposed, and thus could not claim electoral victory, it also meant that his opponents could not convincingly claim that he had been elected by fraud, as no fraud was necessary. In the end, and with the help of a Honduran law which obliged the electorate to either cast a vote or face a hefty fine, Galvez garnered some 300,000 votes (against some 200 who obstinately voted for Zúñiga Huete and some thousands of voided votes) which still allowed him to claim a popular mandate.\footnote{Bursley to the Secretary of State, Telegram 51, May 17, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 235, October 9, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 241, October 15, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III; Bursley to Daniels, November 1, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 246, October 19, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 239, October 11, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 237, October 11, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF) Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III. Actually, both the Department and the Legation noticed a curious gap in the files about the 1944 massacre and Galvéz’ role therein: Reid to Bursley, July 2, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II; Bursley to Reid, July 14, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras.}

While the recall and retirement of Erwin one year previous was not the result of a change in American policy and the "election" of Galvez not a fundamental departure from the Carias era, these changes together did lead to a smoothening of U.S.-Honduran relations. Galvez' election and his subsequent conciliatory policies eliminated Honduras as an obvious target for the anti-dictatorial movement in the Caribbean area, which focused on the older dictatorships of men like Somoza and Trujillo. Erwin’s departure and eventual replacement with an experienced career diplomat eliminated grounds for rumors that the American embassy in Honduras was an active supporter of the local dictatorship. In its international affairs, Honduras, which was traditionally the battlefield of the isthmus due to its central location, successfully focused on being the least conspicuous and objectionable country in the region. While the neighboring countries of Guatemala and Nicaragua were showing alarmingly revolutionary and reactionary tendencies, respectively edging toward communism and fascism, Honduras became the eye in the storm of Central American politics. It was exactly the kind of peaceful and friendly country that the State Department liked to deal with.

In Tegucigalpa, American diplomatic representation after Erwin’s somewhat irregular dismissal was performed by Paul C. Daniels for a while. Daniel’s appointment appears to have been a stop-gap measure as he was already slated to become Director of American Republic Affairs at the Department and left Honduras after some months. Next was Herbert S. Bursley, an experienced career officer like Daniels who had been assistant chief of the Division of American Republic Affairs from 1938 to 1942. Daniels and Bursley were both born around 1900, had joined the Foreign Service around the time that it was professionalized by the Rutgers Act of 1924, and reached the level of secretary of legation—thus introducing them to the political work of their posts—during
the 1930s, when nonintervention was dogma. Both reintroduced a high degree professional detachment from local affairs to the embassy’s political reports, effectively ending the “Carias-can-do-no-wrong” attitude of Erwin, and opened the embassy’s doors to callers who were members of the political opposition. But while both Daniels and Bursley continued to pay lip service to the American interest in the spread of democracy, neither took the “Braden approach” of charging the china shop. They both represented the more measured approach presented in the “Y”-article, sympathizing with local initiatives which were understood to embody careful steps toward more liberal governance, but religiously maintaining the appearance of American neutrality in local affairs. When the Honduran ambassador in Washington carefully inquired whether Braden’s replacement with Daniels as Assistant Secretary implied a move away from the former’s pro-democratic policy, he was told that the only change would be a “difference in approach”.17

Daniels and Bursley’s tenures in Tegucigalpa are representative of this “difference in approach”, which held the middle ground between Braden’s crusade and Erwin’s appeasement. First of all, both Daniels and Bursley reopened the dialogue with members of the opposition, who had long been unwelcome at the embassy. After one month in Honduras, for example, Daniels reported that opposition to Carías was more widespread and friendlier to the United States than Erwin had suggested in his reports.18 Bursley also reported, in a somewhat sympathetic vein, that oppositionists in Honduras were “professional men of far better than average intelligence who seem to have strong and even bitter convictions”.19 Daniels started to receive oppositionists to the embassy and to answer their written missives and Bursley went so far as to invite both government officials and representatives of the opposition to the yearly Fourth of July reception at the embassy. In that way, the American Ambassador hoped to express his “ideas of the democratic spirit”. While both Daniels and Bursley ended the overly optimistic reports on the Cariato and courteously engaged the opposition, they were careful to suppress the impression that U.S. sympathies had swung from the Nationalists to the Liberals. It was made clear to any representative of the opposition that the embassy would not be drawn into local politics.20

Daniels and Bursley showed careful, sympathetic interest in the presidential elections of 1948, which were nominally free and determined who Carías’ successor

17 Newbegin, Memorandum of Conversation with Cáceres, October 24, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. V, cl. 800: Honduras.
18 Daniels to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2861, July 18, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. V, cl. 800: Honduras.
19 Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 138, July 8, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II.
20 Daniels to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2847, July 1, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. V, cl. 800: Honduras; Daniels to the Secretary of State, Despatch 2861, July 18, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. V, cl. 800: Honduras; Daniels (Director of the Division for American Republic Affairs), Memorandum of Conversation with Dr. Zuñiga Huete, Honduran Opposition Leader, December 30, 1947, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 34, Vol. V, cl. 800: Honduras (continued); Bursley to Reid, June 11, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II.
would be. Bursley believed that a peaceful test of strength, in the form of elections, was the only way to dilute political tensions in Honduras and to avert an armed contest between government and opposition. How fair the elections were and who won was considered secondary to the fact that elections did take place. The embassy would be careful to remain on the sidelines during the campaigning season and the elections, unless government imposition was “so cruel as to shock humanity”. Indeed, the embassy was fairly certain that “some” official fraud did take place during the elections. But Daniels expressed “concern” over their course only once, after a known follower of Carías emptied his revolver on the Zúñiga Huete residence. From Washington, where Daniels had already taken up his new tasks, he wrote that the Department took a “dim view of [such] gangster activities”. It was quickly determined, however, that the shooting had been a private initiative without official involvement.

One reason why the embassy showed little interest in who won the elections was that it recognized few fundamental differences between the contending parties—it believed that both lacked real substance. “While there is much talk about ideals and all the rest of it, I am very much afraid that except in the case of a few individuals the struggle is simply the old one between the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’”, Bursley reported to the Department. This view fitted the more general cynicism toward Latin politics that characterized American views after the failed post-War experiments with democracy. Bursley reported in July, 1948, that local politics should not be viewed through “rosy glasses”: Both Liberals and Nationalists had been guilty of fraud and abuses in the past and there was little indication that either had changed its ways in that regard. Embassy reports on the campaign platforms of Galváz and Zúñiga Huete were to the effect that there were few significant differences between the two and that neither should be taken too seriously. According to the embassy, the real issue of the elections was not which party won, but whether a civilized contest could be held at all in Honduras.

Bursley’s reaction to the election results, which showed a clear majority for Galváz, underscored that perspective: By U.S. standards, the Ambassador reported to the Department, the election was a “pathetic travesty”. On the one hand, Bursley chided the government for weighing the dice in favor of Galváz, but on the other hand, Zúñiga Huete had not won the Ambassador’s sympathy by withdrawing from the race.

21 Bursley to Willard Barber (Chief of the Division of Central American and Panama Affairs), September 30, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III.
22 Daniels to Montamat, March 3, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras I; Montamat to Daniels, March 8, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras I; Montamat to Daniels, March 11, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras I.
23 Bursley to Gordon S. Reid (Division of Central American and Panama Affairs), July 14, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras. Zuniga Huete.
24 Bursley to Reid, July 14, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras.
25 On the platform of the National Party, secretary Montamat commented that it was basically sound but would be observed more in breach than in practice: Montamat to the Secretary of State, Despatch 56, March 12, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras I. On the program of the Liberal Party, the embassy commented that it would mean very little if that party managed to obtain the presidency: Montamat to the Secretary of State, Despatch 73, April 1, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras I.
prematurely. However, Bursley found that by local standards, the fact that elections were held at all and had not relapsed into violence was "a vast improvement and a significant step forward to an eventual day which may bring a more truly democratic life for this struggling country". 26 Ironically, the American legation’s commentary on the 1931 elections, which had brought Carías to power, was almost identical. 27

It is difficult to say whether the Galvez election would have been acceptable to the U.S. some three years earlier, when Braden directed policy, but it coincided with the generally low American expectations of Latin politics in 1948. In that context, Galvez’ policies after his inauguration as president came as a pleasant surprise. Neither Galvez nor Lozano, Bursley reported, were “dictator-minded”. 28 Indeed, Galvez adopted an explicit policy of “conciliation”, intended to mend relations with moderate Liberals after the bitter fighting and campaigning of recent years. The new President also entertained the somewhat abstract notion that Honduras should eventually develop toward a democracy, although that process would be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and the Honduran people would have to undergo many years of political education before the ideal could be realized. 29 In the meantime, Galvez took no actions that had the potential to undermine Honduran social and economic hierarchy or to involve the lower strata of peasants and Indians in politics. He did, however, release political prisoners and invited political exiles back to the country. The repression that had characterized the Cariato was relaxed, a change symbolized by the fact that the police in the capital started carrying batons instead of rifles. 30

Since the Galvez administration relaxed political control, as compared with the Carias administration, it was easy for the embassy to imagine that it represented a “step forward”: A progressive move along the continuum that ranged from totalitarian state to democracy. Some decades after the fact, it is more difficult to see the Galvez administration in that light, since it did not represent a fundamental move away from elite/army control over Honduran politics; did not address the social injustices implied in the wide gap between upper and lower classes; and did not renounce the right to strike out against the opposition. As Carias himself admitted to a supporter in July of 1949, the policy of “democratization” under Galvez was a carefully controlled experiment and the government would only allow it to run its course as long as Hondurans showed themselves worthy of their increased freedoms and did not revert to the chaotic behavior in evidence before the Cariato. During the second half of the twentieth century, many successors of Galvez did find it convenient to put a stop to the supposedly democratic experiment initiated in the late 1940s.

26 Lt. Col. Isaacson (U.S. Military Attaché to Guatemala) to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 42-48, May 6, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II.
27 See Chapter 2, page 91.
28 Bursley to Daniels, November 1, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III.
29 Isaacson to the Military Intelligence Division, Report 42-48, May 6, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 39, cl. 800: Honduras II.
30 Bursley to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-27, January 29, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 42, cl. 800: Honduras I.
Lacking the ability to look into the future and inclined to interpret the progression of Honduran history in terms of slow Progress, Bursley came to see the Galvez government as a step forward in the general direction of modernity. While Carías had undoubtedly been a dictator, the Ambassador reported in June 1949, he had done the “hard and dirty work” of pacifying Honduras, thus laying the necessary foundations for current progress.\[^{31}\] In time, and if not provoked by violent opposition, the Galvez administration would improve further and would be much more democratic than the previous one, the Ambassador opined.\[^{32}\] While Bursley was not blind to the authoritarian aspects of the new administration, he did appear to believe that as it represented a small step in the political development of Honduras, the United States could support the semi-authoritarian Galvez regime while still supporting the long-term goal of democracy for Central America. Therefore, he recommended that the State Department provide friendly attention to Honduras if it was threatened from the North or the South (the Left or the Right in political terms) by Arévalo or Somoza.\[^{33}\] In the context of the late 1940s at least, Honduras had become middle-of-the-road.

Bursley’s feeling that Galvez deserved friendly attention did not translate into concrete American support for the new government. Instead, with an optimistic prognosis for Honduras’ political future and with its economy also in good shape, the State Department decided that it was safe to ignore the country in the late 1940s in favor of the pressing demands of the Cold War. Bursley himself was confronted by this attitude from Washington when he noticed that none of his reports and requests for policy guidelines on local political matters elicited a response from the Department. In November 1948, he reported his surprise—and not a small amount of bitterness could be detected in his report—that the Department neglected to answer a query of his as to the appropriateness of holding an embassy reception for the new Honduran president. More disturbing, Bursley noticed that the elections in Honduras were not even mentioned in the Department’s internal publications (the Weekly Review of Latin American Affairs) while the Ambassador himself thought that it was “certainly more newsworthy than some of the alarmist stuff which was published”.\[^{34}\]

After the excitement of elections, the political situation in Honduras returned to its traditionally slow pace. Even Bursley became somewhat dissatisfied with the general “dullness” of his post: Only the periodical “regurgitation” of the long-standing boundary dispute with Nicaragua offered some diversion for the Ambassador.\[^{35}\] When it was Bursley’s time to be transferred to another post, the State Department decided to give

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\[^{31}\] Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 111, April 7, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 42, cl. 800: Honduras I.
\[^{32}\] Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 13, January 10, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 42, cl. 800: Honduras I.
\[^{33}\] Bursley to Reid, November 1, 1948, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 40, cl. 800: Honduras III.
\[^{34}\] Idem.
\[^{35}\] Bursley to the Secretary of State, Joint Weeka 5, August 3, 1950, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 46, cl. 350: Honduras, 1950.
the Honduran mission to the only man who ever showed any active interest for it: John Draper Erwin. Since the Lillienthal case, Erwin had persistently lobbied for reappointment and he managed to obtain the support from the Tennessee Senatorial delegation again. The administration was probably well-satisfied to humor the Tennesseans by reappointing Erwin to a post as quiet and unimportant as Honduras. The appointment did not present a real vindication for Erwin, though, since he had indicated a desire to be promoted to Chile. He settled for Honduras however. There was some agitation against Erwin along the North Coast and in San Pedro Sula, where the old Ambassador was still remembered for his failure to recognize the tragedy of the 1944 massacre. Both the embassy and the Galvez administration shrugged off the criticism as radical and even leftist.36

The reporting of the Honduran embassy quickly returned to the familiar “Utopia Inc.”-style of Erwin’s previous tenure: Everything was well and there was no opposition to the powers that be.37 There was no denying, however, that some things had changed. Unofficial labor organizations were now active on the North Coast where United Fruit operated and Galvez’ conciliation policy, while very conservative by international standards, at least allowed the possibility that social legislation might be considered, perhaps, sometime in the future—a radical departure from Carías’ standpoint. For Erwin, whose romanticized image of Honduras was constructed around its supposed isolation from the modern world with its unions, social legislation, class conflict, etc, etc, this was too much to bear.

Three years earlier, Bursley had reported that the increased activity of labor on the North Coast was largely a normal phenomenon:

It seems quite natural that after many years of the Carías regime during which a dictatorship, frequently benevolent, existed, that the lethargic giant [labor] should begin to stretch a bit and to sense a need and right for a measure of emancipation.38

The Ambassador was even somewhat impatient with those who claimed that labor activity was caused by communist agitation. Bursley was polite but noncommittal when UFCO managers warned him that communist agitation was out of control on the North Coast. The Ambassador pointedly asked them whether the activities they were describing were not, in fact, “promotional activities looking to [the] establishment of workers’ unions in line with the well defined trend in so many parts of the world”.39 When

36 Erwin to President Truman, February 15, 1946, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Official Files, Box 1570, OF1002: Erwin, John D.; Syracuse to Mann and Miller, January 31, 1951, Lot Files, Office of Middle American Affairs Subject File, Box 3, folder marked Memoranda, 1951; Byron Blankenship (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to Honduras) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 473, January 29, 1951, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 48, cl. 350: Honduras, 1951.
37 Erwin, Memorandum on Rumors of General Tiburcio Carías planning again to make race for Presidency of Honduras, December 7, 1951, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 48, cl. 350: Honduras, 1951.
38 Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 98, March 22, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 560.
39 Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 106, April 1, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 560.
the Department informed Bursley that certain unnamed individuals within the American government (most probably CIA agents) insisted that there “must” be dangerous communists in Honduras, the Ambassador calmly answered that there was “nothing to worry about”. Further reporting on the matter was delegated to secretary Maleady, who thought that Departmental thinking on the matter was “disturbingly disjointed if not downright idiotic”.40

Erwin was not quite so tolerant of labor activity. Relying completely on information provided by the anti-labor vice-president, Julio Lozano, and by the American manager of the railroad, Erwin reported several incidents of supposed communist agitation, instigated by migrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Evidence for a communist connection was extremely thin in all instances: A workers’ petition against a particularly stern American superintendent was thought to be inspired by the typical communist “line”; a failed plot to hold up a United Fruit train was thought to be masterminded by well-known labor agitators who would have used their loot for future labor campaigns; some sub-rosa labor organizations were thought to be communist “fronts”.41 There was no obvious reason for Erwin to take these alarmist rumors seriously, except for the fact that he thought Galvez’ policy too indulgent:

The fruit company and rightist National Party elements are impatient of Galvez’ temporizing, but he has insisted on continuance of his conciliation policy, at least until he is convinced that a clear and present danger to the stability of his Government exists. The miracle is that communist activity and unrest have been as slow in taking advantage of the freedom of the last two and one-half years, since Honduras is a fertile field for agitation, particularly in view of its proximity to virulent communist groups of Mexico, Guatemala and Salvador.42

While Erwin’s reports from Honduras must have added to a general impression of communist activity in Central America, he was not the prototype of a “Cold Warrior”. Highly conservative and unable to believe that anyone could be dissatisfied with the Honduras that he knew, Erwin reflexively blamed outsiders for any trouble in his Shangri-La. A return to fatherly policies of the Cariato would be sufficient, however, to set things straight. Meanwhile, the Ambassador kept the door to the outside world firmly shut: American intelligence agencies, which would supposedly help local governments fight communists, were not welcome in Erwin’s bailiwick.43 It is not surprising, then, that

40 Reid to Bursley, January 27, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21; Bursley to Reid, February 14, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21; Bursley to Reid, February 10, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21; Department of State to Bursley, Instruction 18, March 1, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21; Reid to Bursley, February 24, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21; Bursley to the Secretary of State, Despatch 19, January 12, 1949, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 44, cl. 350.21.
41 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 835, June 7, 1951, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 48, cl. 350: Honduras, January to December, 1951.
42 Erwin to the Secretary of State, Despatch 838, June 8, 1951, PR Honduras (SCF), Box 48, cl. 350: Honduras, January to December, 1951.
43 Mann to Randolph, November 10, 1952, Lot Files, Entry 1136, Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for Inter-American Affairs, Box 3, Folder marked Honduras; Randolph to
despite his hostility toward communism, Erwin was quickly replaced by the incoming Eisenhower government. The new administration wished to use Honduran territory as a springboard for its CIA operations against Guatemala and Erwin, a leftover from the 1930s, did not fit into those ambitions.

2.3 The middle of the road in El Salvador

While Simmons reported on the travails of the Castañeda regime with some interest and optimism at first, the Ambassador became disillusioned with it over the years. Several assaults on the government from both rightist and leftist factions forced the President into the arms of the army and security forces. From 1946 onwards, the country was under a permanent state of siege. Even if Castañeda was serious about his promises for reconciliation and more progressive government at the start of his tenure, nothing came of it. For all practical purposes, El Salvador was a military dictatorship by 1948, be it for the fact that the government was obliged by the constitution to hold presidential elections in that year.

Due to the state of siege, the fractious nature of the opposition, and the promise of elections, El Salvador was superficially calm for a while and Castañeda or his supporters may have been under the impression that they could extend their reign without too much opposition. Thus, in true 1930s continuismo style, Castañeda had himself secretly reelected for a second term by the National Assembly in December 1948. It turned out to be a big mistake: Almost as soon as the “reelection” became known, a faction of young army officers committed a coup and took over the reins of government under a five-man junta. These young officers did not represent the only opposition group, perhaps not even the most powerful one. Opposition to the Castañeda regime ranged from ex-President Aguirre and his reactionary friends among the coffee elites on the extreme right to student factions and labor organizations on the extreme left. Several opposition groups of different political leanings could be found in between. The young officers who took control in 1948 were simply in the best position to act on the news of continuismo quickly: These men had been organizing coups since the failed attempt against Martínez in April 1944. After four years of frustrated attempts to gain more power and influence, they were ready, able, and willing to act on every opening.44

Mann, October 30, 1952, Lot Files, Entry 1136, Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for Inter-American Affairs, Box 3, Folder marked Honduras

44 Murat W. Williams (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 499, December 16, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Williams to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-331, December 17, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Joint Weeka; Juan de Zengotita (Division of Central American and Panama Affairs) to Daniels, Memorandum on Background on Salvadoran Revolt of December 14, December 15, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, despatch 264, June 18, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Murat W. Williams (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 499, December 16, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Williams to the Secretary of State, despatch 22, January 23, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador.
During the months preceding the army coup, Albert Nufer was in charge of the American embassy in San Salvador. A careful and unassuming career officer like Simmons, Nufer’s relationship with the local Castañeda regime and its opposition was complex and ambiguous. The embassy held no brief for either camp. It was well aware of Castaneda’s intentions to remain in power, either officially as president or officiously as the power behind the throne of a puppet government. The fraudulent elections for the National Assembly of January 1948, a major victory for the President of course, left little doubt on that count. On the other hand, Nufer and his colleagues knew that Castaneda’s position was far from secure and that there were plenty of opposition groups. Most of these groups, the embassy reported, felt confident that they enjoyed enough popular support to win the presidential elections that Castaneda was supposed to organize. Hence, if Castaneda were to act on his intentions to scrap elections and continue in power, the embassy believed that many opposition factions would feel that the President had cheated them out of their legitimate ascent to power. The result could only be civil strife, which was the embassy’s greatest fear.\footnote{Salvador: Williams to the Secretary of State, Despatch 5, January 9, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 282, July 2, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 413, October 21, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 430, November 2, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October.}

In this charged and insecure atmosphere, Nufer felt that the best that could be done, from the standpoint of U.S. interests, was to stay on reasonably friendly terms with all factions while not showing undue regard for any of them. Halfhearted attempts were made by the embassy to convince Castaneda to hold genuinely free elections, but overall, it tried to stay out of politics. While the embassy respected the progress that the Castaneda regime made in the fields of education, health, and sanitation during the last couple of years, these accomplishments were only possible due to the assistance of U.S. agencies. Besides, the President’s will for power threatened to upset the country and to undo any material progress that had been made. At the same time, the embassy was very pessimistic about the nature of the opposition. Nufer hardly ever mentioned the ideologies that were supposed to inspire the different opposition groups—although he did acknowledge that there were dangerous fringe groups on both the left and the right. The names of the different political groups, nearly all of which made a claim on “democratic” ideals, meant very little, the Ambassador reported. Under the existing state of siege, only those groups who could obtain the backing of conservative army factions stood a chance to gain the presidency. In a word, the general picture painted in the embassy’s reports was one of cynical power politics.\footnote{Nufer, Memorandum on Elections, December 7, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October; Salvador: Williams to the Secretary of State, Despatch 5, January 9, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 379, September 23, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October.}
A report by Nufer on one of the very few politicians in El Salvador who could be regarded as a genuinely honest man with popular support and liberal ideals is revealing in this regard. Minister of Culture Ranulfo Castro, the man in question, could not hope to become president under existing circumstance, because:

[His] greatest strength is his most obvious political weakness. He is an honest man. His name is yet to be linked with graft, political compromises or deals. He is friendly, sincere and efficient. These merits, which might be expected to qualify him highly for a role as Chief of State, contrast sharply with the strength, power and ruthless action which have been considered normal attributes of most Central American presidents (...) To the army, the coffee planters and the urban capitalists, Dr. Castro may appear as a man of too great a heart to guarantee a continuation of a system which grants to the few, the much, and to the many, the little.

At that point, July 1948, Nufer believed that Ranulfo Castro was the most likely man to win honest elections, because he had the support of the lower classes (except for the “communist fringe”). But Salvadoran politics were heartless and Nufer focused his political evaluations on the power brokers—the men with money and arms.

These were the conditions that determined the American embassy’s reaction to the army coup of December, 1948. No-one at the embassy was sorry to see Castaneda go and no opposition group was thought to have a legitimate claim on the presidency. The fact that the December coup was quick and painless was welcomed. Under the circumstances, the new junta was the best that could be had for El Salvador: It was neither reactionary nor revolutionary; neither ruthless nor weak-kneed. In fact, the army groups that came to power in 1948 were a new factor in Salvadoran and Central American politics and were at least partly a legacy of U.S. interference in the region, although the embassy did not recognize that fact at the time.

Before the Second World War, Central American “armies”, aside from the American trained Guardia Nacional in Nicaragua, were mainly irregular militias led by local caudillos. Although there was a trend toward army professionalization, results were meager up to the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, which is when the United States began to take an active interest in the standardization of army training and equipment across the continent. After the War, the newly professionalized army’s began to take an interest in politics and they did not like what they saw. Observing the poverty, backwardness, and instability that characterized many American Republics, professional militaries developed “anti-political” ideologies which blamed Latin American problems on politicians and provided a rationale for military intervention in national administration. The Salvadoran junta of 1948 was a local exponent of this new trend in the development of the Latin American military. According to Walter and Williams, the junta “sought to legitimize its existence via a new political rhetoric and new ways of ruling. The bywords of the regime of Hernandez Martinez and his immediate successors reflected their approach to politics: duty, tranquility, peace, order (...) Although democracy was never

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47 Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 282, July 2, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador.
mentioned, its dangers were implied in the usual criticism of factions, parties, disorder, and anarchy”. Thus, the military junta and its later successors welfare programs and literary campaign, but at the same time initiated an enormous expansion of the armed forces and, despite its theoretical support for democracy, kept tight control over elections and opposition parties.  

Perhaps the one thing that Nufer did not grasp entirely—or, under prevailing conditions in El Salvador, was willing to gloss over—was the danger of an ideology that combined claims on constitutionality and observance of democratic procedures with de facto military rule. As far as the Ambassador was concerned, the 1948 coup and subsequent governments were not refinements in the military’s claim and hold on power—which, from the longer historical perspective, they were—but controlled steps in the direction of stable, progressive, and more democratic governance. As Nufer reported to the Department, one of the first acts of the military junta was to end the state of siege that Castaneda had put into effect in 1946. While the constitution was briefly abrogated, it was reinstated almost immediately, except for those articles dealing with the Presidency and the Assembly (which obviously did not apply while the junta was in power). The junta also declared that in time, free and fair elections would be organized. Until that time, civilians of liberal persuasion were invited into the de facto government; freedom of the press was allowed; and extremist groups on both the left and the right were suppressed so as not to be able to interfere with democratic processes. The reaction of the public at large, as Nufer was careful to point out, was favorable: The lifting of the state of siege was a generally popular move; liberals were assuaged by the institution of freedom of the press and the inclusion of civilian members in the junta; the moderate coffee planters, military officers not included in the junta, and labor unions were willing to give the new rulers a chance as long as they did not veer too much to the left or the right. In all, Nufer believed that the new government was inspired by “high, democratic idealism”.  

To the Ambassador’s considerable dismay, however, the Department neglected to recognize the junta. While all seemed well on the ground—i.e. from Nufer’s perspective—events in Salvador happened to coincide with right-wing military coups in

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49 Nufer to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-337, December 24, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Joint Weeka; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 515, December 23, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Williams to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-331, December 17, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Joint Weeka; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 514, December 22, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-344, December 31, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Joint Weeka; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 127, March 24, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350.21: Communism; Nufer to Robert F. Woodward (Deputy Director of the Office of American Republic Affairs), June 29, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350.21: Communism; Murat W. Williams (U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to El Salvador) to the Secretary of State, Despatch 499, December 16, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-344, December 31, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Joint Weeka.
Venezuela and Peru. To observers in the United States (both inside and outside of government) the sudden burst of military coups was a disconcerting development, especially since those in the bigger, more important countries appeared to be fascist-inspired. Nufer was livid that events in his country were being compared with entirely unrelated actions elsewhere, but to the political top in Washington and to the American press, El Salvador was just too small and insignificant to warrant close scrutiny.\(^50\) For the time being, only the middle echelons of the Department sympathized with the Ambassador’s position: Apologetically, officer Zengotita of the Division of American Republic Affairs assured Nufer that the Division was well aware of the differences between the Salvadoran coup and those in Venezuela and Peru. The order to put a brake on recognition, Zengotita wrote, came from the “highest levels”. The recent splurge of coups had alarmed the administration and by “delaying” recognition, it wished to discourage further activity along those lines.\(^51\) But while the political top was not ready to recognize the new junta, Zengotita ensured Nufer that the Department’s thinking paralleled his:

> We are impressed with the fact that the revolt was touched off by what, after all, can only be considered unconstitutional and dictatorial measures taken by Castaneda. We are impressed also by the popular support that rallied to the junta, by its appointment of civilian junta members and a civilian cabinet, by its lifting of martial law, and by what in general appears to be a desire to organize along the lines of civilian rather than military administration of the country.

Zengotita does note that the Department would have to wait and see how the situation develops and whether the junta "will or will not depart from the traditional Latin American military pattern". Nufer was instructed to continue to report on "the measures taken by the junta to hold elections and restore constitutional government, in the democratic or non-democratic outlook and philosophy of its military members, on the base of the junta's support, etc."\(^52\)

In the end, recognition was not dependent on the junta’s success in restoring constitutional government. Indeed, the United States had signed the Declaration of Bogotá, article 35 of which basically denounced the use of nonrecognition as a political weapon, only some months earlier. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the recognition of El Salvador was only stalled because of the public outcry against

\(^{50}\) Nufer to Robert F. Woodward (Deputy Director of the Office of American Republic Affairs), June 29, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350.21: Communism; 2787; 2812; Nufer to Zengotita, December 31, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September-October; Nufer to the Secretary of State, despatch 513, December 22, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 16, cl. 800: Government. Recognition; Nufer, Memorandum on Department’s Telegram 135, December 27, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 16, cl. 800: Government. Recognition; Nufer to Willard F. Barber (Chief of the Division of Central American and Panama Affairs), December 22, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 16, cl. 800: Government. Recognition.

\(^{51}\) Zengotita to Nufer, December 29, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, September to October.

\(^{52}\) Zengotita to Nufer, December 21, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December.
supposedly “fascist” coups in the larger Latin American countries (public opinion did not differentiate between the coups in El Salvador, Venezuela, and Peru). After the junta had been recognized by the United States and its neighbors, it started to prepare for the elections it had promised to organize. Preparations actually took a full year and, aside from the admittedly complex technical issues that had to be solved, involved a lot of political infighting and clearing the field for the eventual official candidate. The most important military leaders of the junta jockeyed for power over a period of several months, a contest which led to the rise of Major Oscar Osorio as the leader of that body. Osorio is a very difficult man to qualify in traditional political terms, although that is exactly what the American embassy tried to do. On the one hand, the Major had been suspected of fascist sympathies during the War; maintained some sort of liaison with the exiled Martínez, apparently his mentor; and was at one point the favored presidential candidate of the conservative coffee interests. On the other hand, Osorio counted many liberals and even radicals among his political entourage; discouraged Martínez from returning to El Salvador; and religiously observed constitutional procedures during the 1949 election campaign and his eventual presidency. The man only makes sense in the context of the professional mystique of the Salvadoran army officer, which was somewhat like fascism in the sense that it proscribed a major role to the army and vehemently rejected socialism, but also adopted parts of the post-War liberal agenda in its respect for constitutional procedures and its adoption of social legislation in an overall drive to modernize the national economy.

53 Barber to Nufer, January 12, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Nufer to Barber, January 21, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Barber to Nufer, January 28, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 19, cl. 360: Government.

54 Shaw to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-210, August 25, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 12, January 6, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 164, April 7, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Williams to the Secretary of State, Despatch 293, July 29, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 362, September 30, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 58, January 29, 1950, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-1951.

55 For reports on Osorio’s politics, consult: Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 20, January 11, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 33, January 21, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Airgram A-270, October 31, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 411, November 1, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 403, October 28, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 467, December 2, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July-December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 471, December 6, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 494, December 19, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 200, August 1, 1951, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-
Against the background of Salvadoran politics, both Nufer and his direct successor, Ambassador George Price Shaw, described the Osorio government as moderate and as democratic as might be expected.\textsuperscript{56} In regional politics, which were still punctuated occasionally by stirrings of the “Caribbean Legion” and high words between the “democracies” and the “dictatorships, Osorio vowed to assume the role of mediator—thus presenting El Salvador as an island of peace amid the Central American imbroglio. In domestic politics, the President was careful to keep the middle ground between reactionary landlords and reformist-minded intellectuals and labor organizations. This was not an easy matter since militant fringes on both sides of political spectrum opposed the government. Coup attempts by one side were followed by government suppression against both sides. Thus, when a reactionary plot was discovered in March, Osorio had its leaders arrested and deported together with an equal number of known leftist radicals. In Salvador’s polarized society, this was apparently the only policy by which the President could remain on speaking terms with both left and right.\textsuperscript{57}

Much more important, in the embassy’s assessment, than Osorio’s attempts to dissociate his government from the political fringes, was his purported attempt to offer a way forward. The Salvadoran President was thought to be a democrat and a reformer, but not a visionary or experimenter: A measure of press freedom, unionism, and political organization was allowed, but only under strict government supervision so that “irresponsible” and “radical” elements did not take advantage of it. The regime suppressed “fascist” and “communist” organizations without reverting to out-and-out dictatorship: Instead, representatives of all factions—army officers, landowners, labor leaders, and intellectuals—were adopted into the government apparatus. A careful policy of “modernization”, including limited social reform, under military management was supposed to undercut the appeal of extremist ideologies.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Nufer to Barber, January 21, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 283, April 26, 1950, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-1952; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 329, May 19, 1950, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-1952.

\textsuperscript{57} Salvador: Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 61, February 4, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Telegram 294, March 10, 1951, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-1952; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 721, March 13, 1951, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 22, cl. 350: Joint Weeka, 1950-1951; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 741, March 20, 1951, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 22, cl. 350: Joint Weeka, 1950-1951.

\textsuperscript{58} Williams to Shaw, Memorandum on Comments on OIR Report, October 27, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350: Salvador; 3476; Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 212.
Chapter 9

Nufer reported from the outset that the ruling junta under Osorio's leadership included former fascists and communists, liberals and conservatives: "In fact, the rightist and leftist elements within the new government seem so well balanced that it would be difficult to state at this time whether the government is right or left of center". After some weeks in power, the Ambassador could more confidently report that the provisional government was "seeking a middle course":

The Cabinet is not looking for spectacular changes or quick success in its tasks. Responsible Ministers realize that they have a patriotic duty to carry out their work between the pressures of the right and the left. One of the Under Secretaries remarked to a member of my staff this week that the Cabinet had to move cautiously and "educate the Army". At the same time the Cabinet has to stand out against the intrigues of radical extremists who clamor that it is not moving fast enough. Despite the extremists, I believe that the public at large continues to be favorably impressed with the Government's work and is still disposed to lend its support.

One of the more important tasks to be tackled, according to Nufer, was to provide a minimum of economic and social security for the landless masses: "informed persons" realized, the Ambassador reported, that 1932 could repeat itself today unless "substantial progress is made in improving the lot of the laboring masses". Luckily, Osorio was wise to the situation and his government would "endeavor to effect social progress".

In September Osorio formally left the junta together with one of the civilian members, Galindho Pohl, to set up a joint campaign for the presidency. It was a remarkable combination because Osorio was known to have played around with fascist ideas in his youth, while Pohl was a "wild-eyed idealist and half-baked leftist individual" in Ambassador Shaw's assessment. However, the combination seemed to work—for the moment—and Shaw recognized that Osorio and Pohl's party, the Partido Revolucionario de Unificacion Democratica (PRUD), was "middle of the road" by "United States political standards", because it advocated social reforms without "threatening the capitalist structure of the nation". Even though Osorio was recognized as having the backing of the ruling junta, and even though the latter could be said to have "tweaked" the eventual

September 21, 1950, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 22, cl. 350: Joint Weeka, 1950-1951; Wieland to the Secretary of State, Despatch 257, September 13, 1951, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 22, cl. 350: Joint Weeka, 1950-1951.

50 Nufer to the Secretary of State, despatch 513, December 22, 1948, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 16, cl. 800: Government. Recognition.

60 Nufer to the Secretary of State, Despatch 61, February 4, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 800: Salvador, January to June.

61 Nufer to the Secetary of State, Despatch 127, March 24, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 18, cl. 350.21: Communism.

62 Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 221, September 22, 1950, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 21, cl. 350: Salvador, 1950-1952.

63 Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 430, November 10, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December. Initially, Shaw thought that PRUD was a "Communist front": Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 335, September 9, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December.
presidential elections in his favor, the race turned out to be fairly competitive. In the end the Osorio/Pohl ticket beat the sole challenger by 345,139 over 266,271 votes. It was the first election in Salvadoran history in which women and soldiers were allowed to vote and, in Shaw’s opinion, it was so free as to revert to “license” at times. But the outcome was met with “moderate general enthusiasm”.  

The State Department and the American embassy met Osorio’s election with the same moderate enthusiasm. The fact that Osorio was elected in a somewhat free competition; that his government enjoyed some popular support; that it included both military and civilian members of different political leanings; and that it promised to reform the Salvadoran economy and social structure were all appreciated by the United States. It was recognized that the Osorio government was not a “real” democracy, but it did fit into the slow progress toward better government described in the “Y” article. Compared to the leftist Guatemalan regime; the rightist Somoza regime; and the fascist-inspired coups in Venezuela and Peru, the situation in El Salvador was actually rather promising. Both the embassy and the Department were also quite willing to “help” the Salvadoran government to stick to the middle of the road. 

American efforts to manipulate the direction of the Salvadoran “revolution”, as the junta described its coup, dated back to 1949—before Osorio was elected. American aid programs, private loans, and Point IV technical assistance might have been modest when compared to Marshall Aid to Europe, but in a small nation like El Salvador, such programs offered the Americans enough leverage to encourage the local regime to adjust its political and economic policies to U.S. preferences. Thus, a possible loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to build a hydroelectric plant in Salvador offered enough incentive to the junta to hold elections so that the loan could be approved by a legally elected Assembly and signed by the President. After Osorio’s election, American “assistance” focused on the nature and direction of the developmental and social policies of the government. While Osorio was deemed trustworthy enough, Galindho Pohl’s influence was thought to draw the government too much into a radical direction. As the new president of the National Assembly, Pohl directed efforts to formulate a modern constitution for El Salvador. According to the embassy, Pohl’s plans for the new constitution were disconcertingly nationalistic—including, among others, a proposed article that would extend Salvadoran borders to 200 miles from its coasts. Shaw reported at the time that he commented “informally” to friends of the embassy that “I personally consider this draft [of the constitution] as extremely nationalistic and an excessive restriction on free economic, political, and social intercourses between El Salvador and the United States”. According to the Ambassador, the Department should also express its opinion to the Salvadoran embassy in Washington that there were “undesirable features” in Salvador’s draft...
constitution. "I am sure the effect of merely mentioning this matter at such a time would not be lost upon either Major Osorio or [Salvadoran ambassador to the United States] Castro".\footnote{Shaw to the Secretary of State, Despatch 468, December 5, 1949, PR El Salvador (SCF), Box 15, cl. 800: Salvador, July to December.} To back up this stance, Shaw advised the Department to freeze all financial assistance until a new constitution was published. Indeed, none of the controversial articles made it to the eventual constitution of El Salvador. While this must have been due partly to the influence of Salvador’s own ultra-conservative coffee interests, American meddling in the matter is sure to have had a major influence. In terms of politics, it is also likely that such meddling strengthened the hand of Osorio and the so-called “moderate” faction while it blocked the ambitions of Pohl and other leftist in the government.

The State Department showed itself to be generally appreciative of Salvador’s mode of government. The election that brought Osorio to power were characterized as the most free that the country enjoyed since the 1931 election of Araujo. While “Leftists have attacked it for being to moderate and the Rightists have attacked it for being too radical”, the Osorio government was holding its own. In May 1951, El Salvador and the United States signed their first Point IV agreement for technical assistance, thus declaring their joint interest in the modernization of the El Salvador.\footnote{Siracusa to Mann and Miller, September 31, 1951, Lot Files Entry 1144, Box 3, Folder marked Memoranda, 1951; Bennett to Mann and Miller, May 31, 1951, Lot Files, Entry 1144, Box 3, Folder marked Memoranda, 1951; Bennett to Miller and Barber, March 31, 1950, Lot Files, Entry 1144, File, Box 2, Folder marked Political Summaries.}

The last ambassador to be appointed to Central America before the Eisenhower administration came in was Angier Biddle Duke. On the face of it, Duke was an extreme caricature of the political appointee. A scion of two wealthy families, the Biddles and the Dukes, Angie led a privileged and sheltered life as a child and young adult: His days were spent at elite schools, his weekends by the pool or at the beach, and his vacations with hunting trips to Africa and Asia. Having no need to worry about money, a job, or the future in general, young Angie lacked direction or ambition. At 22 he dropped out of Yale and spent some years toying with unsuccessful business plans. Exactly the type of playboy, one might think, whose wealthy and influential father got him appointed to an embassy so that his loafing at Southampton Beach would not embarrass the family.

But this was not exactly what happened. Duke was still leading a relatively easy life when the War broke out in Europe. In January 1941 he volunteered for duty and, in the army, Angie found discipline and direction. While not serving in combat, Duke did climb the ranks from private to major in Air Force intelligence and went overseas in that capacity. At the end of the War, he was assigned as an escort officer to a congressional committee which was to visit Buchenwald very shortly after its liberation. The visit to the concentration camp turned out to be “the 48 most harrowing and horrifying hours” in Duke’s life and left a lasting impression. Noticing that many inmates of the camp had not yet left even though they had been “liberated” two days previous, Duke realized that “the
inmates had been there many of them so long that they didn't want to leave. It was just so horrifying, so pathetic to see these beaten human beings, beaten into a way of life which they had gotten so horribly accustomed to that when the gates were thrown open, they couldn’t – couldn't leave”. After the War, Angie devoted many years of his life to helping those who were beaten and downtrodden by their governments and, quite naturally, he developed a lasting terror for the dehumanizing nature of totalitarianism.68

After the War, Duke went back into business for a while, but with some help and urging from a family friend who happened to be the U.S. ambassador to Argentina, ended up applying for and getting admitted to the Foreign Service. After two years as embassy secretary in Argentina and Spain, Angie attracted the interest of a Congressional Committee inspecting relations with Spain and was appointed ambassador to El Salvador at age 36—the youngest American chief of mission up to that time. Angier Duke was one of several political appointees appointed to Latin America toward the end of Truman's second term. Their task was not so much in the political field of representing U.S. policies to the Southern governments, but in “selling” the Point IV Program. The program, which in itself was a continuation of wartime aid programs, was aimed at developing the economies of the Third World with technical assistance so that they would be less susceptible to “radical” programs of a nationalist or communist bent.

It turned out that Angier Duke was particularly well-suited for the work. First of all, he did have a sincere desire to help those less fortunate than himself, but his conception of aid did have an quality of noblesse oblige—both in the sense that he believed that the wealthy United States had an obligation to help less developed countries and in how he, as a wealthy American, positioned himself toward underprivileged Salvadorans. In one of his many public speeches as the ambassador to El Salvador, Duke noted that the United States had world leadership “thrust upon it” and that this position entailed great responsibilities. One was to convince others of the vitality of the American economic system and the “real practical hope” it offered for the betterment of Salvadorans’ lives. Only by accomplishments in this sphere could the hope of democracy be made manifest “to draw to it the faith of the unlettered and the underprivileged”.69

Second, Angier turned out to have a knack for public relations and he spend most of his time as ambassador traveling, giving interviews, inaugurating public works, and attending parties to “illustrate the interest of the United States in the development of El Salvador”. His good looks, natural charm, and talent for dramatic gestures made him the

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69 Address by the Honorable Angier Biddle Duke, United States Ambassador to El Salvador, at Florida Southern College, Lakeland Florida, Wednesday, April 15, 1953, Duke Papers, Box 43, Scrapbook marked A.B.D. San Salvador.
darling of the Salvadoran press. An exemplary incident that illustrates his style and attitude occurred when Duke asked an ordinary cook to dance with him at a formal ball. The Ambassador later claimed that the gesture was unplanned, but it turned out to be a great P.R. coup: Salvadoran newspapers lauded his egalitarian attitude and his friendly interest in the uplift of “simple” Salvadorans.

While Ambassador Duke quickly won over Salvadoran opinion for himself and for the Point IV program that he advertised in all of his many public appearances, President Osorio knew how to win the diplomat for himself. Days after Duke presented his credentials, Osorio invited him on a tour through a valley that had been struck by an earthquake two years earlier. Arriving in an impeccable blue suit on the morning of their appointment, the young Ambassador was somewhat embarrassed to see Osorio in an army style “open neck khaki shirt and trousers”. Having “piled” three cabinet ministers in the back of a “rather beat up Buick sedan”, Osorio told Duke to “hop in” and settled behind the wheel himself. Remembering the ensuing road trip some months later, Duke noted that:

It was quite a day. In fact it was the best kind of introduction to this beautiful country and its friendly democratic people. He [President Osorio] showed me the reverse side of the coin too: the aching poverty, the potbellied children in miserable ugly tumbledown country towns; dirty filthy houses with no windows, no water. We talked of the social unrest that wells up from such situations of squalor, and the possible avenues to bring hope to such pitiable conditions of despair (...) The magnitude of the task to which President Osorio and his ministers had set themselves soon became clear. I got the point.  

Later in his life, during the Central American “crisis”, Duke visited El Salvador several times for government and human rights organizations and came to recognize the road taken during Osorio’s military rule. In a 1989 interview, Duke noted that back in 1952 General Osorio “was the undisputed leader of the military, which maintained an uneasy but working alliance with the so-called oligarchy, the land-owning, coffee growing class. This kept the country on, let us say, a politically peaceful and economically productive course but one that was stratified dangerously in terms of class structure”. In the early fifties, however, Duke and Osorio, while being from radically different backgrounds, managed to find common ground in their objective to reform the Salvadoran economy from above with a Salvadoran public works programs and American technical aid—thus “bringing hope” to common Salvadorans and preventing “social unrest” like they discussed during their road trip. Whether either one of them truly wished to change the “dangerously stratified” social structure is not clear. Duke himself, in any case, thought that Point IV could have brought “social reform”, but after 1953, the Eisenhower administration allowed the program to “dry up” and, incidentally, fired Ambassador Duke. Thus, according to Duke, “in those eight years after Harry Truman I

70 Duke, An Ambassador reports in, Duke Papers, Box 43 Scrapbook marked A.B.D. San Salvador.
believe that the seeds of discontent were successfully sown making inevitable the reform and revolutionary movement that started in 1980”.  

3. **EPILOGUE: THE CASTILLO ARMAS SOLUTION**

The general assumption among historians is that by ending the Guatemalan years of spring, the United States wanted to reinstate the 1930s “Somoza solution” in Central America. The comparison with the early 1930s is indeed informative, but only in the manner in which that period was presented in chapter 2.

In 1953, the CIA picked an obscure Guatemalan colonel, one Carlos Castillo Armas, to lead the “liberation army” which was supposed to topple Arbenz. The advance of the army, which was a rather rag-tag bunch of exiles and mercenaries, on the Guatemalan capital was a ruse for the diplomatic offensive and psychological warfare that eventually got the better of Arbenz. Since Castillo Armas and his army did not play the leading part in the CIA coup against Arbenz, his selection as main liberator was a practical choice which initially did not imply American support for his eventual rise to the presidency. As it turned out, however, the U.S. embassy in Guatemala was not able to find a satisfactory successor to Arbenz among the country’s existing officer corps and eventually settled for Castillo Armas, who was inaugurated as president on July 8, 1954.

The Castillo Armas experiment combined recent and older American assumptions about- and historical experiences with Central America. The idea that a firm leader backed up by friendly American advise could set his country on track towards modernity dated back at least to Whitehouse’s experience with Ubico or Lay’s support for Carías. The more recent failure of liberal experiments in Guatemala and El Salvador undoubtedly reinforced the notion that Central Americans could not be left to their own devices. The successful experience of the fight against Nazism during the Second World War supplied the reasoning to get around the still popular nonintervention principle. Moving still closer up to the time of the coup itself, by the early 1950s the most successful local government was thought to be the “middle-of-the-road” type which combined careful liberalization with strong military influence in politics: The kind of government prevalent in El Salvador and Honduras (both of which were closely involved

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71 Interview with Angier Biddle Duke, April 4, 1989, ADST. Emphasis added.
72 Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 61-67 and 183; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 61, 165, 199, and 200; Cook, *The Declassified Eisenhower*, 222; Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 381. While it is obvious that the United States played a very significant role in the events of 1954, several scholars have pointed out that internal factors should not be overlooked. After all, it was the Guatemalan army that eventually betrayed Arbenz. Gleijeses’ *Shattered Hope* offers an unequalled account of so-called “Ten years of Spring”. Bethell and Roxburgh, *Between the Second World War and the Cold War*, observes that the Guatemalan revolution is something of a regional anomaly, since the balance of political power in other countries had shifted to the Right long before 1954. Yashar, *Demanding Democracy*, 167-170 and 191-211, argues that CIA intervention in 1954 was a catalyst for developments that would eventually pull Guatemala to the political right anyway.
in the execution of the coup). Only as a result of Somoza’s active and, it would seem, partly unsolicited support for the coup in Guatemala was the latter welcomed back in the fold of reputable nations in the region after 1954.  

Since Washington was solely responsible for lifting Castillo Armas from the obscurity of exile and turning him into the “liberator” of his country, the new President was considered as something of a blank slate: To be filled in as the Americans saw fit. So, what sort of leader did Washington desire Castillo Armas to be? The model was not Ubico, as some historians have suggested. In fact, among the reasons for Castillo Armas’ selection as libertador were his credentials as a supporter of the conservative branch of the Guatemalan revolution. The Colonel had fought bravely in the 1944 uprising against Ubico’s successor Ponce and he had been a supporter of Fransisco Arana, the most conservative member of the revolutionary junta and, later, Arévalo’s chief of staff, who was gunned down on a country road outside Guatemala city in 1949—probably because he had been a threat to the more liberal wing of the revolutionary movement headed by Arbenz. It was a conservative evolution toward modernity—as opposed to a radical reaction or revolution—that the Eisenhower administration preferred.

While it was expected of Castillo Armas that he would break the supposed power of the communists in Guatemala—and he did, in fact, have over 2,000 “communists” arrested during the first days of his tenure—the State Department also stressed that “U.S. action [should] prevent Guatemala from reverting to a dictatorship (...) [If] this happened we would suffer serious propaganda loss.”

Though this element in American policy of the time has generally been ignored, every official in the foreign policy establishment, from the Ambassador up to the President, regarded the Castillo Armas government as an exciting experiment in the formation of a perfect little proto-capitalist state—the sort of experiment that would later be called nation-building. As Ambassador Schoenfeld had put it already in 1952:

Guatemala represent in miniature all of the social cleavages, tensions, and dilemmas of modern Western society under attack by the communist virus. Conditions will worsen considerably before we can improve them, and we should regard Guatemala as the prototype area for testing means and method of combating communism.

The post-coup experiment in Guatemala was to be a shining example to the rest of the world: In the first country ever where the people had ousted its communist oppressors (as the official line ran), irrefutable evidence of improvement in the political, social, and economic spheres had to be readily discernable.

Thus, the Americans initially believed that Castillo Armas had “overwhelming popular support” in Guatemala and told him that “in the not-to-distant future, say six months from now, you should hold free and democratic elections” to confirm that fact.

74 According to Clark, The U.S. and Somoza, 189-190 and 196, note 44, operation Success was a watershed in U.S. Nicaraguan relations.
Naturally, the ambassador in Guatemala told him that he would “do all in my power to help you” achieve that goal. At the same time, Washington would financially support the economic rebuilding of Guatemala under Castillo Armas (channeling almost half of American direct support for Latin America to Guatemala between 1954 and 1957). The reason was that:

A prosperous and progressive Guatemala is vital to a healthy hemisphere. The United States pledges itself not merely to political opposition to communism but to help to alleviate conditions in Guatemala and elsewhere which might afford communism an opportunity to spread its tentacles throughout the hemisphere.

Undeniably, however, Washington was aware of, condoned, and even supported harsh measures against Castillo Armas’ opponents—who were, of course, Soviet agents. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Guatemala city, Castillo Armas had 2,000 people arrested and, due to a lack of prison facilities, interned in concentration camps. That initial action was only a foretaste of Castillo Armas’ dictatorial mode of government over the next three years. As Richard Immerman has noted:

In addition to utilizing Gestapo-like tactics, Castillo Armas initiated a series of political changes that codified the authoritarian nature of his rule. His 1956 constitution institutionalized the 1954 statute that insured that there would be no organized opposition to his governing party. Returning to the caudillo tradition, he replaced almost all the local administrators and magistrates with his personal representatives and disenfranchised over two-thirds of the population.

From the outset, Washington supported harsh measures against the allegedly communist opponents of Castillo Armas. But this was imagined as a temporary situation: A regrettable but necessary transition period during which communist influence needed to be weeded out. As the Council on Foreign Relations argued about one year after the coup: “The suppression of political freedoms that had characterized the Arbenz rule in Guatemala led many to the easy assumption that President Castillo Armas would at once install a fully democratic order [yet] determined as it was to prevent any renewal of the communist threat, the new government demonstrated great caution in permitting freedom of activity”.

The unprecedented success of the CIA-organized coup against Arbenz fostered the belief that the United States could continue to control events in Guatemala after 1954. The most dangerous and, as it turned out, fatally flawed element in this assumption was that Washington could steer Castillo Armas through an initial period of dictatorship to exterminate the communists and then have him make a u-turn to lead the liberalization and modernization of his country. High and low officers of the State Department continually reminded Castillo Armas of his role as an example to the “free world” and his

78 Rabe, Eisenhower and Latin America, 61-62.
80 Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala, 198-200.
concurrent obligation to give his country the best possible administration. At the 1956 Panama Conference, Secretary of State Dulles told Castillo Armas that “Guatemala was the only example of a country in which people have been able to free themselves after a Communist Government had been in power and (...) the world was watching Guatemala carefully and therefore it was important that an example be given to the free world of the success of a people recovering after a period of Communist rule”. The next day, Henry Holland, the Assistant Secretary for American Republic Affairs, took the Guatemalan President under his wing, telling the latter that the communists were “doing their best to force him [Castillo Armas] into a position of a ‘government of force’.” While Guatemalan troops had opened fire on peaceful demonstration barely a month before, Castillo Armas assured Holland that he would not allow the communists to do so. Somewhat ill at ease with the Guatemalan President’s easy promises, Holland notes in his report of the conversation that: “I congratulated him as warmly as I could and told him that the objective of the communist party was to drive a wedge between him and his people. If they could persuade his people that he had become a dictator, then the breach would be opened”. 82

Castillo Armas continually backtracked on his promises to hold free elections or even to liberalize his regime, telling his American allies that it was “very difficult at times to maintain democratic processes when those at the other side [i.e. the communists] were free of such restrictions”. 83 Despite good progress in the American-backed efforts to modernize the Guatemalan army and reconstruct its economy, the State Department eventually acknowledged that progress on the political plane lagged behind. Already in 1956, the embassy in Guatemala reported that “President Castillo now appears committed to a policy of stronger action against opposition elements, in contrast to his former moderate position to which (...) it will be most difficult for him to return (...) His communist and other enemies may be expected to take full advantage of this situation to the probable detriment of his prestige with the Guatemalan people”. 84 The State Department came to a similar conclusion several months later, when it acknowledged that Castillo Armas had at most been partially successful in his supposed objective to “provide positive, visual proof that life in Guatemala under a democratic government is preferable to life under a communist-dominated government”. 85

So why did Washington continue to tolerate, even support, Castillo Armas’ dictatorial practices. The Eisenhower administration was obviously not averse to


83 Memorandum of Conversation, Panama City, July 22, 1956, EOF II, reel 25, frame 336.


85 Memorandum from the Deputy Director of the Office of Middle American Affairs (Stewart) to the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for inter-American Affairs (Rubottom), Washington, April 9, 1957, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. VII: American Republics, 135-137.
intervention if it suited its interests. Why not stop aid to Guatemala or take even harsher measures to force Castillo Armas to comply with Washington’s pipedreams about a controlled anticommunist experiment in Guatemala? The answer is, of course, that the Colonel had come to control his American allies at least as much as Americans controlled him. In building up the Guatemalan President as a great anticommunist and democrat; having provided him with modern armaments and hard cash; after one New York ticker tape parade, 2 state visits, and 3 personal meetings with Eisenhower, all in the context of battling communism,\(^{86}\) the administration could hardly manhandle the colonel without being accused of aiding the cause of the enemy:

> It is in line with our objectives in Guatemala to do all we can to assure the success of the Castillo Government, to minimize the possibility of any return to communism, and to protect ourselves from charges that should the latter occur it did so because we failed to continue economic aid. If we are to be realistic, we must appreciate the fact that Guatemala’s record as the only country in the world so far to have rid itself of a communist-dominated regime weighs heavily with the U.S. public and Congress. If conditions appreciably worsened in Guatemala, no amount of explaining by the Department could justify our failure to provide a comparatively small amount of aid to that country while we continue to do so to countries which are at best neutrals in the Cold War.\(^{87}\)

Instead of guiding Guatemala to a brighter future, the Eisenhower administration had tied the direction of its Central American policy to the vagaries of a petty colonel who was simply more accustomed to the straightforward discipline of the army barracks than to the complexity of nation building.

\(^{86}\) Program for the visit of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guatemala and señora de Armas to the United States of America, October to November, 1955, EOF II, reel 15, frames 505-510. Also consult: Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 180.
