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Author: Berk, Jorrit Hubertus Henricus van den
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In 1948 someone at the American embassy in El Salvador edited a memorandum of conversation and decided that the words used to describe local political actors were out-of-date. He crossed out “conservative” and “liberal” and replaced them with “moderate” and “leftist” respectively.\(^1\) In hindsight, this simple revision was one of the first symptoms of the approaching Cold War: a dramatic restructuring of “us” and “them”, friends and foes. In terms of causality, it is hard to determine whether this change of nomenclature preceded or followed developments in the political field. In all probability, their relationship was mutually enforcing. It is certain, however, that the U.S. diplomatic posts played a central role in the international transfer of information and the transnational contest for meanings. How that is so, is a central question of this text and the answers will be reviewed in these concluding remarks.

In an attempt to bridge theoretical gaps existent in the field of International Relations, political scientist Alexander Wendt hypothesized in a 1992 article that “people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meaning that the objects have for them”. A preexisting mantra in constructivist social theory, Wendt applied it to international affairs:

States act differently toward enemies than they do towards friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. [The Neorealist conceptions of] anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. U.S. military power has a different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar ‘structural’ positions (...) The distribution of power may always affect states’ calculations, but how it does so depends on the intersubjective understandings and expectations on the ‘distribution of knowledge’, that constitute their conceptions of self and other.\(^2\) How useful Wendt’s hypothesis is for his fellow political scientists is a question far beyond the framework of this text to answer. For diplomatic historians, however, these seemingly straightforward observations should be of considerable interest.

Indeed, the question of identity, of ascribing “meaning” to other actors based “conceptions of self and other”, is one that has occupied (implicitly or explicitly) many

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1 See chapter 9.
Conclusion

diplomatic historians. In this context, Lars Schoultz’ straightforward observation that there is a fundamental differences in the relationship between the United States and various weaker states—the policy toward Peru being characterized historically by condescension, while that toward Denmark being characterized by polite respect—illustrates the limitations of a purely Realist approach. But for historians, there is often an additional dimension to this question of meaning. The question of what the past “means” for “us”, the contemporaries of the historian, can sometimes impose itself with particular intensity. Regarding the current subject, this “triangulation” in the production of meanings—those that derive from the interplay of historical actors and those that derive from the interplay of historian and history—is one of the most interesting aspects.

As was already observed in the introduction and as was referred to in several following chapters, the history of U.S.-Central American relations—especially when it concerns the right-wing military regimes of the region—is a subject that is often dealt with in terms of what that history means for the nature of the United States and its foreign policy. At least since the late 1970s, while the meaning of Vietnam was still busily debated and new imbroglios developed in America’s backyard, the historiography of U.S.-Central American relations has been dominated by the project of “exposure”: to expose U.S. imperialism; to expose U.S. racism; to expose U.S. support for brutal dictatorships. For the historians who were engaged in this “project”, it was a meaningful venture, as it addressed contemporary issues of American foreign policy. But for the subjects of study, historical actors such as Sheldon Whitehouse, Matthew Hanna, Julius Lay, etcetera, the terms used in historiographical debates were not necessarily relevant. As historian Andrew Crawley stated in a very similar context, the historiography of U.S. Central American affairs has long been “hostage to [contemporary] politics [while a]n aim of writing history must be to present the past in the context of its own concerns, not in the context of ours”.

The purpose of this text is not to “whitewash” United States actions in Central America. Indeed, its role in the history of isthmian societies was often tragic—as has been observed at several points in the foregoing chapters. However, to suggest that the United States “propped up” or consistently and knowingly supported dictatorships in Central America is misleading. It obscures the actual workings of foreign policy and of international relations by ascribing an artificial coherence and single-mindedness to the American foreign policy establishment while it also obscures (even belittles) the role of Central American actors.

By “reducing” the diplomatic relations between the United States and Central America to a human scale and focusing it on this contentious issue of dictatorship, this text aspires not only to offer a “thick description” of certain historical events and developments, which can be an interesting exercise in itself, but also attempts to reveal the all too human confusion and the paradoxes that often accompanied the pursuit of U.S. foreign affairs. It also aims to be sensitive to the role that local, Central American

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3 See introduction.
4 Crawley, Somoza and Roosevelt, 3 and 5.
actors played in the eventual form that this policy took. This is not, of course, a study in Central American diplomacy. Due especially to the abundance of U.S. archive materials, as opposed to the scarcity of Central American sources, this could hardly have been otherwise unless the domain of the research were drastically reduced to a single country or to a smaller time scale. However, the role of Central American actors is certainly more visible in a study of embassy-level foreign affairs than it is in a study focused on Washington politics. Lastly, and most fundamentally perhaps, this is a study into the importance of information, in the sense of meanings and identities, in the pursuit of foreign policy.

However, the construction of meaning in the context of inter-state relationships is, of course, intimately tied up with the relative power of the states concerned. It is obvious, for example, that the United States determined what the conceptual framework of U.S.-Central American relations would be. Whether, in other words, that relationship would be based on understandings of “Peace and Amity”; the “Good Neighbor”; the “United Nations”; or the “free world” was largely up to policymakers in Washington. Moreover, American policymakers and diplomats were never quite comfortable with the conceptual framework of politics in Central America, as witnessed, for example, by the association made by American diplomats between continuismo and Fascism. This does not mean that some “meanings” could not be shared. Whitehouse and Ubico seemed to agree that “backward” countries such as Guatemala needed a “firm hand” to guide them to a better future. Likewise, Simmons seemed to share some of the democratic aspirations of the Salvadoran middle sectors shortly after the war.

While Washington policymakers defined the framework of the international dialogue, they could not completely control its contents. Despite their power, they were not, after all, omnipotent. On the one hand, Central American actors had some leeway in determining what abstract concepts would mean in the day-to-day reality of local life. They might seek to appropriate certain meanings and negotiate the details of others. During the late ’30s, the Honduran Liberal Party attempted to define Carías as a Fascist. Central American Liberals of the early ‘40s tried to convince Americans that the United Nations’ war aims implied a moral obligation on the part of the United States to rid the region of caudillos. But in the end, it was the caudillos themselves who were most successful in cultivating concepts such as the “Good Neighbor” or the specter of Communism, because they wielded most power in their respective bailiwicks.

Definitions had the power to determine the difference between “us” and “them”; dictatorship and democracy; Fascism and freedom; moderate and radical; modern and backward. Definitions mattered because they determined who got the money and the arms; who had credit to waste and who did not; who was in power and who was out. But the interplay between definitions and power was a two-way street. Those with power, be it, for example, military dominance on the U.S. side or censors and secret police on the Central American side, always enjoyed greater opportunity to determine or appropriate meanings than those with less or no means of power.
Conclusion

On the other hand, it is clear that American diplomats outside Washington, at the posts in Central America, did not always understand or agree with the abstract concepts cooked up in Washington. Neither did Washington policy makers always understand what their plans would come to mean in the very different countries of the isthmus. The most obvious example would be that the State Department felt obliged to remove Charles Boyd Curtis from his assignment to San Salvador in 1931, because he had completely misunderstood and misrepresented central policy guidelines. At the same time, however, Washington underestimated Martínez’ ability to stay in power and garner local and international support on a national sovereignty platform, while American policy, based on the “Peace and Amity” Treaty, turned out to be bankrupt. In fact, only hostile neighbors such as Ubico wished to uphold the treaty because the latter regarded Martínez as a threat to his regional ambitions. The only truly Liberal state of the isthmus, Costa Rica, sympathized with Martínez’ stance. Clearly then, American “progressive” policies such as the 1923 Treaty had lost its appeal to the supposed Liberal allies of the United States while only the reactionary regimes cynically acknowledged its usefulness for unintended purposes.

The U.S. legations and embassies often found themselves squarely in the middle of the competition over power and definition. As the official channel of information between the State Department and the Central American capitals, the embassies negotiated between and at times gave practical meaning to information coming from different directions. In fact, more than mere “channels” of information, the diplomatic posts and their officers were themselves important actors in that great contest of definition. The backgrounds, experience, ideals, and loyalties of Foreign Service officers left their marks on information flowing from North to South and vice versa.

Going back to early 1930s, to what we now know was the genesis of modern, military dictatorship in Central America, it becomes immediately apparent that the terms in which historians tend to speak of that time, the start of the “era of tyranny”, is far removed from the experience and understanding of contemporary actors. The rise to power of Ubico and Carías, both by some form of election it should be remembered, was interpreted by Whitehouse and Lay in the context of the simultaneous elections of Araujo and Sacasa. Defined as the “Ubico solution”, U.S. diplomats welcomed the rise of these leaders because they seemed to share their progressive ambitions for the future of Central America. Also, the new generation of Central American statesmen seemed to have at least something of a popular mandate and they were receptive to American advice. If the ambitions of the American legations seem to us paternalistic and elitist, that is simply because they are an extension of worldview of these gentleman diplomats—the latter being the only factor to give a semblance of consistency to American policy in the different isthmian republics: Washington provided limited guidelines which tended to be contradictory. At any rate, there was no conspiracy or intention to “prop up” dictatorships.

In terms of long-term developments, what should also be mentioned about this particular period is that progress, order, governmental stability, and limited social reform
were highly valued by U.S. diplomats, but not primarily as an antidote to Communism. Especially when compared to the Cold War period, this ideology was not considered a great or chronic danger. The diplomats did sometimes get caught up in local red scares, but this did not influence their overall assessment of Central American politics. Rather than a negative fear of Communism, the value of progress, order, etcetera lay in the modernization of local societies, the increased opportunities for American business, and the necessity for local and hemispheric U.S. leadership as opposed to the influence of the major South American and European countries.

In that context, it is clear that Martínez' coup and consequent slaughter of some 10,000 “Communists” could never have been considered as consistent with U.S. policies in the region. It was Martínez’ defiance of the United States, his unworthiness in the words of Francis White, that ultimately dominated the American view of the General. What was on the line was not the local threat of Communism, the plight of the Salvadoran peasant, or even the de facto obliteration of the republican form of government in El Salvador. These were all minor inconveniences as compared to the fact that Martínez’ hold on power made a mockery of the Treaty of Peace and Amity, which had provided a sense of direction to U.S. Central American policy for over 10 years.

From the standpoint of U.S. involvement, the real tragedy of the 1932 massacre was not that American warships stood by to assist, as Chomsky and others claim, but that it hardly registered with the American diplomatic personnel. McCafferty was doubtlessly concerned about the rumors about “lustful atrocities” committed by savage “communistic” Indians, but he also told Martínez that communism was a dead issue as soon as the crisis was over. As in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ fictionalized account of a massacre of banana workers, the events of 1932 simply disappeared from American’s historical recollections once the diplomatic correspondence on the event had been neatly bound and archived. Only some 15 years later, and probably through the lens of the World War, the Nuremberg trials, and the post-War hostility against “disreputable” governments, did embassy officials remember that Osmin Aguirre had led a machine gun squat during the Matanza. But while this represents the first time that the massacre became meaningful in diplomatic parlance, time had taken off the sharp edges of that event. The exact date and death toll could not even be remembered with precision.

The continuismo campaigns challenged U.S. diplomats’ perception of the local rulers as simply “strong” men who had come to power with the explicit or implicit consent of the people. After about 1936, there was no question that these rulers were dictators. This proved to be difficult to accept for the American ministers. Most, if not all, of them assumed that continuismo would not meet with the approval of the State Department. However, the State Department valued its policies of non-intervention and the Good Neighbor far too highly to be willing to discard it in favor of supporting honest elections in Central America. This was not always easy to understand for the local diplomats who were as yet innocent of the rigidity of the nonintervention principle, as indicated most clearly by Lane and Corrigan’s advocacy of a “Responsible” Good Neighbor. The
Conclusion

Conclusion must be that continuismo and the more permanent establishment of dictatorship in Central America was accepted for reasons of hemispheric policy, not because the U.S., let alone its representatives, had any sympathy or even use for these regimes.

In the context of the local continuismo campaigns and growing concerns about the threat of Fascism—a concern that developed earlier and was more acute among the foreign service establishment than it was among the general population—U.S. diplomats reported with increasing frequency on the rise of corruption and nepotism in Central America and their rising fears that the local regimes secretly sympathized with Fascism. What makes this period confusing is that Washington’s interest in Central America reached an all time low. Local legations received (almost) no guidance from the Department and it is very hard to say if their reports had any effect on their seniors, who were focused on European affairs. It is also in the context of the threats emanating from Europe that the caudillos themselves found new ways to make themselves useful to the Americans. By redefining their regimes in terms of continental solidarity in the face of an international crisis, they managed to turn the tables on local oppositionists who attempted to brand them as Fascist stooges. Thanks to their diplomatic acumen, they secured the legitimacy of their rule in American eyes before the start of the Second World War.

Relations between the United States and the Central American republics during the War itself represented both the culmination of developments since the implementation of the Good Neighbor policy and the harbinger of future developments. On the one hand, the nonintervention principle was elevated to religious dogma and the U.S. supported the dictatorships unconditionally in the interest of the war effort while the dictatorships unconditionally supported the U.S. in order to be ineligible for lend-lease aid, flexible trade and financial agreements, and prestigious United Nations status. This is how the period is often characterized in the relatively scarce historical research. And while it is not a false image of U.S.-Central American relations during the war, it ignores the many momentous changes that were going on at the same time—leading many historians to underestimate the importance of the War in the history of U.S.-Central American relations and to overestimate the lines of continuity between the 1930s and the Cold War.

First of all, the period leading up to and including the first years of that war brought some major practical changes in U.S. policy toward Latin America. For the Foreign Service, this meant a major change of pace, functions, and objectives in the daily management of legations and embassies in the other American Republics. The demands that the State Department made on its embassies in Central America had two important consequences: First of all, the increased workload and demand for speedy action meant that the embassies became highly dependent on the local regimes for prompt and favorable action, as indicated by Erwin and Des Portes’ spirited defense of the cooperative attitude of Carias and Ubico. Considering the rewards that the local regimes might expect for such cooperation (as noted above), none of them hesitated to
help. Due to this close cooperation, the embassies were far more favorably impressed with the local regimes than they had been right before the war. A second consequence of the increased demands that the State Department made on its Foreign Service due to the war, was that the embassies did not have half as much time to investigate local political developments as they had before the war. Consequently, many otherwise astute political observers in the Foreign Service reverted to a rigid, clichéd image of Central America as being basically static. Dictatorship in general and the contemporary regimes in particular were assumed to stay in power at least for the duration of the war. The possibility or desirability of political change was completely ignored up to (and including) 1944.

Second, the war years witnessed the hollowing-out and redefinition of non-intervention. Especially during the late thirties, there was a fair amount of consensus among both Americans and Central Americans on what non-intervention meant. Basically, a broad definition, the absence of all forms of interference as opposed to the mere absence of armed intervention, had become the norm. During the early years of the war the State Department and Foreign Service, partly under pressure from war-time needs, completely (although to some degree unconsciously) redefined non-intervention until only the narrow definition (absence of overt military action) was left. Close relations were established between the embassies and the local military regimes in the fields of economic warfare and anti-subversive activities. Through a system of blacklists for Axis companies and the founding of local economic coordinating committees the U.S. embassies acquired an important coordinating role in Central American economies. The long-term importance of this redefinition of non-intervention, aside from the short-term support for local regimes, was that it mentally prepared American Foreign Service officers for more far-reaching intervention in Central America during the Cold War.

Aside from a redefinition of non-intervention, the construction of an image of what the Nazi–threat could mean for Central America, mentally prepared American diplomats for the Communist threat after the war. There is an important difference between the Communist threat as it was perceived before and after the war. The turning point seems to have occurred during the World War. During the 1930s, there was no ongoing concern about Moscow-directed communist activity that was aimed at overthrowing local governments and establishing a Soviet sphere of influence. There were periodical red scares in Central America, as in El Salvador in 1932, which started among local society and could influence the American embassies. Thus, any researcher who wants to find evidence of a concern for Communism among US diplomats in Central America can do so, but taken as a whole, the sources do not indicate a continuous concern with communism before World War II.

After the war, a fundamentally different concern for communist influence developed. Aside from the ideological antagonism toward communist or other leftist organizations, a real fear for Soviet power developed and it was assumed that such power reached Central America. During the war the embassies and the Department developed the language that allowed them to imagine a monolithic, centrally organized
movement against American interests that manifested itself in local political organizations, unions, cultural movements, etc. This was the language of Nazi “subversion” and “fifth column” activity—quite unknown before the war. There are very striking similarities between the description of Nazi subversive activity and Soviet-communist activity, while there is a striking contrast with the description of communist activity before the war. In short, U.S. diplomats developed the language which allowed them to imagine the presence of Soviet-Communist power in Central America. The stage was set for the start of the Cold War, but it did not follow the World War directly.

The first observation to make about the final years of the World War is that the Foreign Service was taken completely off guard by the popular revolutions of 1944. The short term cause is, as noted before, that at least up to 1944, the Foreign Service was immersed in war related work and had little opportunity to investigate the momentous political developments in Central America. Some rare instances of contact between the American Foreign Service and discontented Central American citizens are Nugent’s talk with an unidentified laborer and Thurston’s liaisons with Dalton. The long term cause is that American diplomats had long thought that Central Americans were politically “immature” and thus unable to grasp the liberal ideas required for a democratic revolution unless they could depend on American assistance. Thus, Long had preoccupied himself with the uplift of Latins for decades, but was completely oblivious to the developing democratic resistance against Ubico before 1944.

Ironically, U.S. war time propaganda against Fascism and for democracy had stimulated the growth of liberal ideology in Central America. Furthermore, pro-democratic propaganda in combination with an increased US role in Central American life had caused the Liberal opposition to think/hope/wish that the US would eventually intervene in Central America to topple the dictatorships and bring democracy. This, after all, was the professed objective of the war. But while U.S. intervention did in fact increase during the war (as described above) the Foreign Service continued to subscribe to, or pay lip service to, the credo of non-intervention. To Central American Liberals, this was hopelessly inconsistent: “Why do you give us roads, hospitals, and sewers while you allow the tyrannies to continue in power?” The inability of the Foreign Service to anticipate this question or deal with it when it arrived caused bitterness on both sides.

In Guatemala and El Salvador, where the downfall of the dictators was very sudden and the embassies were basically confronted with the *fait accompli* of Liberal governments, the US chiefs of mission were actually carefully optimistic about the new regimes. But Erwin, who was particularly close to Carias, resisted the idea that more liberal regimes were possible or desirable. The ambassador basically reverted to early 1930s Justifications for dictatorial rule in Central America—a justification that had been fortified by three to four years of smooth wartime cooperation. Thus, the Foreign Service in Central America represented in miniature an important split in American thinking on democracy versus dictatorship in Central America after the war.

Some officers in the State Department and the Foreign Service, presumably due to the ideological constructs underlying the fight against Fascism, wanted to continue the
Conclusion

fight against dictatorship after the defeat of the European dictatorships. Spruille Braden and his supporters were the major proponents of the fight against dictatorship and for democracy. For a while, Braden and his collaborators had immense influence in the State Department and their crusading spirit led to the US rejection of the Péron (Argentina), Somoza (Nicaragua), Trujillo (Dominican Republic), and to a lesser extent Batista (Cuba), and Carías (Honduras) dictatorships.

It seems obvious that if the U.S. decided to fight dictatorship, it should support democracy. And even though everyone agreed on this point in principle, there was considerable disagreement over what constituted true democracy in Latin America and how it should be supported. In dictatorial countries, support for democracy meant that the U.S. had to ally with the forces of discontent and revolution. In the newly established liberal countries, support for democracy meant a tolerance for political experimentation and social reform that was not easily acceptable for U.S. observers. Thus, there was considerable discussion in the State Department over the post-war pro-democratic policy. As stated before, the Central American embassies represented this discussion in miniature, with the Guatemala and Salvador embassies basically supporting Braden and the embassies of Honduras and Nicaragua being in disagreement with his idea. The embassy of Honduras was especially vehement in its opposition to Braden’s ideas and its arguments carried great weight in the Department.

Aside from the abstract discussions on the merits of an anti-dictatorial/pro-democratic policy, there was the issue of practical, day-to-day diplomacy in the context of this discussion. While it is generally accepted that the U.S. briefly had a pro-democratic policy during the post-war years, it is actually very hard to find any trace of it in practical diplomacy. That is to say, an anti-dictatorial policy clearly manifested itself when a concrete, limited problem presented itself. For example, when Somoza of Nicaragua gave in to local and U.S. pressure and organized elections only to commit a coup against the popularly elected government, the United States acted decisively and broke diplomatic relations with the Somoza regime. However, in countries were matters were not as clear cut, the embassies had to make do with very vague instructions and apply them to ambiguous situations. This is especially apparent in El Salvador, where experiments with more liberal government were halting and uncertain, or in Honduras, where a relatively benign dictator hung on to power by his fingernails. In the embassies in these countries the ambassadors had to fall back on their own assumptions about Central American politics and the U.S. position therein. Also, they had to deal with superiors who were very uncertain on whether they were committed to the overthrow of dictatorships and the spread of democracy, especially in the absence of an acute crisis such as that in Nicaragua.

In short, whether the US had an anti-dictatorial policy in countries like Honduras and Salvador mainly depended on the views of men like Erwin, Long, Thurston, Simmons, and Kyle—all men of very different experience and temperament. This situation created great uncertainty both in the embassies and among Central Americans who traditionally looked to the United States for signs of (dis-)approval. In the end, this
could only lead to mutual suspicions and disappointments. Especially in Salvador, where the embassy was carefully sympathetic to the liberals, Simmons grew impatient with the haphazard progress of Liberalism while Salvadoran Liberals grew disappointed with the inconsistent policy of the United States. In Honduras, the Erwin was quite firmly behind the dictator and refused to take local Liberals seriously. In the mean time, politically astute caudillos reasserted their authority everywhere and basically solved the dictatorship vs. democracy discussion by demonstrating their continued ability to provide peace and stability in Central America. They were of course assisted by the advent of the Cold War.

This development coincided with acute disappointment in the progress of democracy in Central America after 1947, which, it would appear, was an independent development. In El Salvador, the landowning classes and military caste gradually reasserted their power, while social reforms in liberal Guatemala went beyond what was considered appropriate by U.S. diplomats. Embassy personnel blamed these events on the weakness or immaturity of the Liberal movement in Central America and gradually concluded that they could not help people who could not help themselves. In this context of a perceived Communist threat combined with a perceived lack of strength and ability on the side of the Liberal factions, American diplomats placed their trust in the “middle men”: populist leaders with a military background like Osorio who cultivated a language of ideological moderation and economic progress.

As has been remarked before, it is fitting for a text that focuses on the American Foreign Service officer to end with Eisenhower’s wholesale replacement of chiefs of mission in Central America in 1953. The new president acknowledged the importance of the background and world view of his emissaries and believed that the old hands were too “soft” to execute his plans for the “liberation” of Guatemala. But while the style of an ambassador like Peurifoy differed greatly from the previous “Good Neighbors”, some degree of continuity was also in evidence. Taken over the whole, one can note a tendency among American diplomats to favor “middle men”: leaders who were neither too liberal nor too authoritarian (at least in the view of the Americans), but who held the middle ground between the two. Reigning pessimism about the nature of Central American politics stimulated American diplomats to support presidents who ruled with a firm hand, but who were also beholden of American advise. From Whitehouse to Peurifoy, and from the “Ubico solution” to the “Castillo Armas solution”, the envoys believed that they could steer the middle men away from authoritarian rule and toward a brighter, perhaps even more democratic, future. They were mistaken.

While this text has attempted to portray American foreign policy in Central America on a human scale, a current trend in the historiography is to answer Big Questions as to the nature of America’s position in the world. This has been true for some time now and is not surprising since America’s existential enemies of the 20th century—Nazis and Communists—have all ended up in the dustbin of history. Throughout the century that the United States was faced with rival powers and ideologies, thinking on America’s
place in the world focused on defense of the free world or at least of the national interest. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, historians grappled with the question of whether there was not some affirmative or positive tradition of American foreign affairs: a tradition that was not merely defensive (let alone isolationist) but that existed independently of foreign threats. During the 1990s—that is, after the Cold War had been "won"—so-called "triumphalism" provided an answer: The United States was the instigator, agent, or at least benefactor of a general trend toward more liberal democracy and an "open door" trade network.

Events around the turn of the millennium demonstrated, however, that liberal democracy was not about to engulf the world; that a capitalist economy did not necessarily show an upward trend; and that not everyone around the world appreciated the role that the United States had played over the last decades. Triumphalism, therefore, faded to the background and in the setting of the war on terror and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the question arose as to whether the United States played a much more sinister role in the world. Was the United States not, in fact, an Empire like so many others that had existed throughout human history?^{5}

In the context of this debate the question arises as to whether the ministers and ambassadors discussed before fit into a larger interpretive framework which defines United States actions in the world as "imperial". In other words, were they mere diplomats who, while forcefully asserting the interests of their government, did not demand nor receive special privileges from the governments to which they were accredited? Or were they more like the proconsuls of older empires who acted like and were locally accepted as provincial governors sent from the metropolis. Were the military dictatorships with which they dealt most of the time compliant "treaty princes" like the Indian Rajas under the British Empire? Or were they cunning politicians who used the American ambassador as just another pawn in the local game of power politics?

From the outset, it should be noted that any of the diplomats discussed above would be abhorred at the mere suggestion that they were agents of an empire. Such accusations were not uncommon, though. The assertive role that the United States played in the Caribbean after the Spanish-American War and into the 1920s certainly left the impression that it was an imperial power. It was this impression that both Hoover and Roosevelt tried to take away with a nonintervention policy and, later, the Good Neighbor policy. Sensitivity to any sign of Yanqui Imperialismo did persist, however, regardless of the definite improvement of inter-American relations during the 1930s. Despite attempts to woo the Yankees, it is also likely that the authoritarian rulers of Central America would violently reject the accusation that they were subservient to the American empire. As has been described in some political biographies of these leaders, they were proud and nationalistic if nothing else.

^{5} For an open-ended treatment of this question, see Maier, Among Empires. Not everyone agrees that an American empire is necessarily a "sinister" force in world affairs. Boot, Savage wars of peace, claims, for example, that U.S. imperial interventions across the globe have had the effect of ending bloody conflicts.
Conclusion

While one might detect a considerable amount of self-delusion or even outright hypocrisy in the self-definition of both diplomat and dictator, it is indeed questionable whether “Empire”, as an interpretive framework, illuminates more than it obscures. Some of the more “fashionable” queries in the contemporary empire debate—“whether [it] is a new imperialism or business as usual, whether the United States should be properly called imperial or hegemonic, whether it is benevolent or self-interested, whether it should rely on hard power or soft power, whether this empire most closely resembles the British Empire or the Roman, and whether it is in its ascendancy or in decline”—are of little relevance to the narrative of the past 300 pages.

This is not to say that contemporary research based on this inquiry into Imperialism is useless. Indeed, Kaplan herself made a potentially important and certainly thought-provoking contribution to the field of diplomatic history by demonstrating how porous the borders between “domestic” and “foreign” really are—an accomplishment that has eluded many of her peers in the aforementioned field. Also, the concept of “creolization”, which has been proposed as an addendum the study of empire, has in a broad sense inspired some of the observations in the foregoing text. However, and this is something that current historians of U.S. imperialism tend to forget, the use of the term “imperialism” goes back a long, long way in the history and historiography of the United States and Latin America. Whether it is populist political leaders of Latin America deriding “yanqui imperialismo”; American historians denying that imperialist ventures in the Caribbean were anything but a “grand aberration”; or theorists of dependency and World System analysis on both sides of the Rio Grande, U.S. imperialism has been a contested issue perhaps as far back as 1898. Can a historian of U.S.-Latin American relations use a term with such a long and painful history and still make a claim to objectivity?

Again, this text makes no attempt to whitewash American actions. But considering the sensitivity of the term empire specifically in the context of U.S.-Latin American relations, it would seem that its use conceals more than it exposes. Despite a larger international context characterized by large discrepancies in power between Central America and the United States, it should be born in mind that the U.S. foreign policy machinery was not a bureaucratic behemoth created for the sole purpose of colonial rule. Neither were Central Americans remotely subservient if their own vital interests were involved. Instead, the U.S. Foreign Service was surprisingly chaotic while local actors were entirely independent—at least compared to much of what has been written on this subject. Therefore, a wholesome approach to the future study of the history of U.S.-Latin American affairs emphasizes the diversity of actors and competing interests over monolithic structures and local encounters over centrally directed policy—even if the ultimate conclusion must be that it is a tragic history indeed.

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