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The Military and Electoral Politics: The Cuban Election of 1920

MILITARY intervention in the Latin American political processes is one of the most prominent national traditions of the area. *Pronunciamiento*, *golpe de estado*, *cuartelazo* underscore the martial dimensions of the Spanish American political lexicon—all suggestive of direct involvement of the armed forces in the competition for national political power. The more dramatic expression of military involvement, the coup d'état, often has obscured less conspicuous forms of army involvement in national politics. Sympathy for the policies or personalities of an incumbent administration or a candidate for elective office often has led to a partisan involvement of the armed forces in the electoral processes. Responding to professional aspirations, career considerations, and concern for their corporate integrity, the armed forces often have acted as a pressure group seeking to influence—often extralegally—election results. At the same time, civilian leaders, also seeking favorable election returns, frequently have encouraged, and often deliberately inspired, army intervention in the electoral process.

Through much of their history, the Cuban armed forces served as a powerful agency which affected the outcome of presidential elections. From its creation in 1908, the Cuban army developed within the crucible of partisan politics. Regimental commands in provincial capitals and a network of far-flung Rural Guard outposts throughout the interior of the island enabled Havana to promote the political interests of the incumbent administration, thwart the aspirations of opposition candidates, and assure the continuity of a partisan order during the first three decades of the Republic's history; between 1905 and 1928,

no incumbent president or president-backed candidate lost an election.

Election irregularities attributed to army involvement did not pass unchallenged. The August Revolution in 1906 against the government of Tomás Estrada Palma (1902-1906) resulted largely from electoral deceptions and the intimidation of the opposition by the Rural Guard.¹ Similarly, in February 1917, former President José Miguel Gómez (1908-1912), charging election irregularities, led the Liberal Party and Liberal sympathizers within the armed forces into rebellion against the Conservative administration of Mario Menocal (1912-1920).²

The passions of the 1917 revolution had not subsided when national elections in 1920 rekindled partisan antagonisms.³ Competition for the Liberal Party presidential nomination between José Miguel Gómez and Alfredo Zayas ended when Gómez won the Party's appointment and expelled his rival. Zayas subsequently formed the *Partido Popular Cubano* and cast about for allies among the anti-*Miguelista* ranks. The newly-formed PPC entered into an alliance with the Conservative Party, forming the *Liga Nacional*. The political alliance, arranged by President Mario Menocal, permitted the Conservative chieftain to frustrate the presidential aspirations of his long-time Liberal foe; at the same time, Menocal sought to insure his own reelection; in return for Conservative support Zayas pledged to support Menocal for a reelection bid in 1924.⁴

Military leaders shared the Conservative President's hostility toward the Liberal presidential candidate. The army command, in fact, had substantial reason to fear a *Miguelista* triumph at the polls. Two successive

Menocal administrations and a revolution later, the Liberal candidate threatened to undermine the military order resulting from eight years of Conservative rule. Officers who had staked their careers on the ability of the Menocal administration to survive the *Miguelista* armed challenge in 1917, commanders who had benefited directly from the Liberal defections produced by the 1917 revolution, and all military personnel who had gained professionally and personally from 1916-1917 and had fought the Liberals in 1917 feared a Gómez victory. The reorganization threatening the preponderantly-Conservative officer corps under a Liberal administration drove the military to support the government candidate.

ADMINISTRATION leaders exploited military suspicions of the Gómez candidacy. Conservatives warned the military that a *Miguelista* victory would see Liberal officers who had defected in 1917 returned to positions of command.⁵ The Conservative newspaper, *El Día*, asked rhetorically how Gómez, who had attempted to destroy the fabric of the army in 1917, could be permitted to become Commander-in-Chief. Gómez's candidacy, the editorial concluded, was a "grave offense to the Army."⁶ *Zayistas* predicted that the election of the former President would disrupt and disorganize the military service; *Menocalista* commanders would be retired, Conservatives suggested, to permit Liberals to return to the armed services with the rank they would have held had they remained on active duty.

Administration propaganda cast the 1920 campaign as a contest of vital importance to the future integrity of the armed forces. The *Zayista* effort reinforced the army's fear of political change, convincing many officers that a Gómez victory was inimical to the best interests of the service. Once military leaders came to believe a *Miguelista* victory would be pernicious, they willingly intervened—for the good of the service—in the electoral process. Many officers came to

perceive the viability and stability of the army as the underlying issue of the 1920 campaign. The army as a whole opposed the Liberal candidate. In Oriente, for example, the Military District Commander committed himself to the defeat of the *Miguelista* ticket in order to preserve the integrity of the army.

Many officers and men believed that a Gómez victory would jeopardize their careers. In the eastern province of Oriente, some officers worked "conscientiously, in order to save their commissions."⁷ Rural Guard commanders, compromised by past political activities, feared that a Liberal administration would result in the retirement of scores of officers. *Menocalista* officers, in fact, were prepared to lead the army in a revolt to prevent the inauguration of José Miguel Gómez.⁸

During the final months of the campaign, Havana took the necessary steps to assure the election of the administration candidate. In September 1920 Secretary of Gobernación Charles Hernández, the alleged architect of electoral frauds in 1916, assumed the portfolio of War and Navy. Managing the two most powerful executive departments, Hernández controlled virtually every phase of the electoral contest, including the election machinery, the licensing of firearms, authority over municipal governments and municipal police forces, and the assignment of the armed forces.⁹

The tense preelection atmosphere, provided the government with a pretext for introducing the armed forces directly into the election process. Liberal warnings against election frauds permitted the administration to undertake military action in the guise of precautionary measures. Government officials themselves, in fact, evoked the spectre of Liberal violence to encourage fear of political disorder and thereby facilitate the centralizing of electoral controls to undermine the Liberal campaign. Conservatives interpreted Liberal predictions of post-election violence as threats of political disorders prior to the 1 November election, thus justifying an extraordinary military presence in the closing weeks of the campaign. The administration, in fact, announced the discovery of a Liberal plot, scheduled for 17 October, to overthrow the government. The alleged conspiracy permitted the government to dispatch large numbers of officers and men to frustrate any future anti-administration schemes, arrest provincial Liberal leaders, and harass the campaign of the opposition.

The government appointed Military

Supervisors throughout the island. The Menocal government, Secretary Hernández explained, would "not be caught unprepared by another rebellion."¹⁰ The appointment of Military Supervisors, sanctioned by the Constitution, the Organic Law of Executive Power, and the Organic Law of Municipalities, permitted the central government to take over from municipal and provincial authorities, alleged incapable of maintaining order and stability, and enforce its will on any part of the island. The almost exclusive use of army personnel for this purpose demonstrated the scope of military involvement in the election. Havana detached officers and men from the authority of the Secretary of War and placed them under the jurisdiction of Gobernación. And in 1920 Hernández possessed the authority of detaching select officers to serve under *Gobernación* in any given district. The choice of Conservative officers as Military Supervisors further emphasized the political mission of the commanders appointed by the administration. Asked why the Provincial Inspectors were Conservatives, Hernández asked impatiently, how could the administration "be expected to send out Liberals in such capacity."¹¹

The administration's professed concern for national order concealed the political objectives assigned to the armed forces during the 1920 campaign. Menocal early summoned the commanding officers of the provincial military districts to Havana, encouraging them to use their influence and authority to promote the candidacy of Alfredo Zayas. Military Supervisors likewise were expected to win their assigned municipality or province for the government candidate, with the promise of promotion if successful. Such political involvement, in fact, frequently led to rapid promotion. The personnel selected for supervisory duty included individuals most susceptible to promotion incentives; young and inexperienced officers, as well as sergeants and corporals, received appointments. The administration also sought out officers hostile to the Liberal candidate for supervisory chores.

Officers with a distaste for political service were transferred to Havana and placed under the supervision of Army Headquarters. Commanders with fewer inhibitions replaced them. Transfers, leaves of absence, and missions abroad eliminated other officers unsympathetic to the government effort. The administration also purged all officers suspected of Liberal sympathies, replacing them with Conservative commanders.

The municipalities and provinces placed under Military Supervisors

conformed to the *Zayistas'* political needs. Havana appointed army intervenors most commonly to districts in which the apparatus of regional administrative control, including the *Ayuntamiento*, judicial authority, and local law enforcement agencies, was under the jurisdiction of Liberal authorities. In regions where Conservatives were numerically inferior to registered Liberals or thwarted by an incumbent Liberal administration, a simple complaint to Havana accusing local officials of abuses and irregularities sufficed to warrant the appointment of a Military Supervisor. In Santa Clara, for example, a traditional Liberal stronghold, 20 of the province's 30 municipalities passed under the authority of Military Supervisors. Districts safely in the *Liga* Conservative fold, on the other hand, were spared military intervention. By election day, the military intervenors had occupied 73 of the island's 116 municipalities.

The occupation of a majority of the island's municipalities, however, represented only one dimension of Havana military controls. In the 1917 revolution, for example, many Liberal mayors-elect abandoned their elected offices to join the party leadership against Menocal; the resultant municipal vacancies permitted Havana to name *menocalistas* to replace the insurgent Liberal officials. By 1920 Havana saw no need to appoint military intervenors in Camagüey Province, for municipalities under the control of pro-government officials possessed sufficient local power to deliver the district to the *Liguista* candidate.

POLITICAL activity by local military detachments further reduced the need for the formal appointment of a Military Supervisor. In Pinar del Río the pro-*Liga* provincial commanders obviated the necessity of an army intervenor. Similarly, a key appointment or transfer often sufficed to enlist the support of a local detachment. Officers and men of tactical units distributed in the provinces and municipalities who were sympathetic toward the government candidate were assigned to Rural Guard posts and military sub-districts. In Oriente the military was reported "converted into a political machine," with the province's Rural Guard units used exclusively for political purposes.¹² Days before the election Santa Clara was described as a "militarised province."¹³

It was thus possible for the government to control a province or municipality without formal appointment of a military intervenor, relying instead

on a cooperative local army post. This practice was most commonly employed in remote *barrios*, where formal vote-getting generally relied on coercion and intimidation of the rural population.

The Military Supervisor operated against a backdrop of martial law, wielding extraordinary power over the district to which he was appointed. Army agents represented Havana's intervention into municipal affairs, usurping municipal immunities and prerogatives for national political ends. Upon appointment the Military Supervisor appropriated executive authority, including the direction of the municipal police force, supervision of the *Ayuntamiento*, and administration of the local treasury; the army intervenor also possessed authority over the local Rural Guard detachment, thus adding the rural constabulary to his command. The Military Supervisor was responsible only to the Secretary of *Gobernación*.

The Military Supervisor's extraordinary power permitted the central government to usurp municipal authority with relative ease. From this position it was a short and natural step for the Military Supervisor to distort his statutory authority for political ends. The political mission of the Military Supervisor consisted largely of neutralizing the opposing party's campaign. The government's disclosure of the alleged Liberal uprising planned for 20 October allowed the administration to arrest many Liberal leaders on conspiracy charges. Appointed ostensibly to preserve order, the Military Supervisor acted in an inordinately highhanded fashion to discharge his trust. Liberal campaign rallies were banned as pernicious to public order; Liberal political speeches, judged inflammatory and provocative, were prohibited. Military Supervisors expelled local Liberal leaders, forcing *Miguelistas* to flee in fear of their lives. Arrests, intimidation, threats of violence, shootings, and an occasional mysterious murder undermined the Liberal campaign in virtually every municipality served by a Military Supervisor.

In the interior, remote from the operations of organized opposition and isolated by poor communications, the armed forces practiced little restraint in imposing a Conservative consensus. In provincial cities and larger municipalities, the government confined its efforts largely to attacking the Liberal Party organization, intimidating the candidates, and generally harassing the Liberal electoral campaign. In the interior the armed forces, largely Rural Guard detachments, attacked the Liberal constituen-

cy, attempting to intimidate registered Liberals into staying away from the polls on election day. In Oriente Province the armed forces appropriated voting credentials (*cédulas*). Soldiers entering a household seeking a fictitious individual would arrest the head of the house. Protesting he was not the individual sought, the householder was required to present his *cédula* as proof of identification; upon presentation, the arresting officer, claiming to be personally satisfied, said he had to take the *cédula* to his commanding officer as proof of the holder's true identity. The soldiers never returned the *cédula*. "The thing is done in such a way," the American Consul in Santiago de Cuba reported, "that the man is actually grateful to the soldier for not taking him to prove his identity before the judge after a night in jail, and if he afterwards realizes that a trick had been played on him, he is afraid to complain about it."¹⁴

The armed forces subjected the Liberal constituency in the countryside to methodical intimidation and harassment. Midnight raids by the Rural Guard upon the homes of known Liberals warned the household of the dangers of voting. Mass Liberal abstentions, particularly in districts where Conservatives were numerically weak, proved particularly effective in determining the outcome of provincial elections. One American military observer suggested that if immediately before the election the Rural Guard went about in the interior warning Liberals "not to vote, or threatening violence, reprisals, expulsion or other penalties," causing many to remain away from the polls, a "Municipality may be lost, or even a Province."¹⁵

The military continued to promote the administration candidate up to the day of the election. The government assigned troops to polling places, a measure predicated on the prior conditioning of Liberals to the armed forces and designed to frighten Liberal voters away from the polls. The legal sanction against the public presence of the armed forces on election was largely ignored; on 1 November troops paraded on the streets and conducted "maneuvers" in the interior. These last government measures succeeded in keeping a considerable number of Liberals from voting.

ALFREDO Zayas won five of the island's six provinces, losing only Havana. The new President had received his mandate as a result of the armed forces' increasing participation in the political processes. Within a decade the military would emerge as

the most powerful political force on the island, cultivated by any group which aspired to national power. Party leaders elected to the presidency invariably discovered in the armed forces a valuable political instrument to promote partisan causes. The willingness with which the military commanders served partisan ends, moreover, reflected the political character initially infused into the armed forces under the Liberals in 1908. The national army had become the armed extension of a ruling political party, with the result that the success of a military career was tied to the fate of an incumbent administration.

Because commissions, promotions, and transfers were determined by political criteria, army leaders felt compelled to promote the prevailing partisan order. A complex network of vested interests, fostered and sustained by political appointments, promoted the partisan commitment of the armed forces. Sensitive to the political underpinnings of their careers, military leaders tied their professional aspirations to the star of the incumbent president. For the same reasons the military was the wary scrutinizer of the political order. Opposition candidates in the very process of challenging the prevailing partisan order raised the spectre of a political change potentially pernicious to the established structure of the armed forces. A new administration, hostile to the personalities and policies of the defeated incumbent government, perforce would reorganize the armed forces.

The entire military command, from the Army Chief of Staff to the commander of a remote Rural Guard detachment, had a personal and professional stake in the outcome of elections; accordingly, the military developed into the prime agent of *continuismo*. Further, the deterioration of national political parties, which continued to fragment and splinter around dissident personalities, the relative meaninglessness of suffrage, and the inability of civilian political organizations to fulfill the aspirations of ambitious politicians moved the armed forces into the center of the political arena. The military quickly filled the vacuum created by dysfunctional civilian organizations, emerging ultimately as the substitute for traditional party structures. First by appointments to army command based on political credentials, and ultimately by intervening directly in the political processes, the military emerged as a national organization capable of providing civilian leaders with political power. By the late 1920s, the army in Cuba had developed into the sole national institution.

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3. Political disorders produced by election irregularities ultimately became a source of policy concern for the United States. Havana's peculiar relationship to the United States, contracted in the Permanent Treaty, American stra-

tegic and economic interests on the island, and later, the danger to the lives and property of foreigners all placed increasing pressure on Washington to minimize electoral frauds, traditionally the source of organized political violence. In 1920, seeking to avoid post-election disorders, Washington appointed American inspectors to supervise Havana's conduct of the national election. American diplomatic and military officials on the island were instructed to observe closely the administration's practices during the campaign. This study is based largely on the reports of these officials on the island in late 1920. Most of them can be found in File 2657-Q, Records of the War Department, General and Special Staff, National Archives, Record Group 165 (hereinafter cited as WD/NA, RG 165), and File 837, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives, Record Group 59 (hereinafter cited as DS/NA, RG 59). In most instances, the individual documents will not be cited in the interest of conserving space, but the author will be happy to supply complete citations as well as more copious footnotes to interested persons.

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