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Rómulo Betancourt: From a Communist Anti-Imperialist to a Social Democrat with US Support

STEVEN SCHWARTZBERG

Abstract. An examination of the evolution of Rómulo Betancourt's views in the 1930s and 1940s shows how he came to look for a close relationship with the United States just as the State Department, and later the Central Intelligence Agency, were coming to view reformist movements such as Betancourt's *Acción Democrática* as the best possible bulwark against communism in Latin America. The resulting international relationship during the three years of democratic government in Venezuela known as the *trienio* was cordial and potentially durable. Its failure is indicative of both the importance of local political leadership in the maintenance of democratic openings and the strength of nationalist notions of political legitimacy in US policy.

Neither the Cold War, nor the hegemonic position of the United States, nor Venezuela's economic dependency, were significant factors in the overthrow of Venezuelan democracy in 1948.¹ US officials saw Marcos Pérez Jiménez as *less* friendly to US interests than the *Acción Democrática* (AD) government which he overthrew. Had it not been for a lack of imagination on the part of the US ambassador to Caracas, and above all his excessive faith in non-intervention as a means of harmonising US and Latin American interests, US policy might well have helped the *adecos* to

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¹ This conclusion is in accord with a growing literature on the subject. 'Those who assume that the source of Latin America's political turmoil and democratic failures is primarily external – US intervention and manipulation; economic dependence – may be disappointed with the historical analyses in this volume', write Larry Diamond and Juan Linz of a recent collection of essays. Without exception, they note, each of the contributors attributed the course of political development and regime change in the countries they covered primarily to internal structures and actions. L. Diamond, J. L. Linz and S. M. Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America* (Boulder, 1989), p. 47. See also J. L. Linz and A. Stepan (eds.), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Latin America* (Baltimore, 1978). The contrary position is based in part on a widespread although mistaken assumption that the Cold War did not begin significantly to influence either US policy toward Latin America, or Latin American politics, until 1947 or 1948. See L. Bethell and I. Roxborough (eds.), *Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948* (Cambridge, 1992); and D. Rock, (ed.), *Latin America in the 1940s: War and Postwar Transitions* (Berkeley, 1994). I am grateful to Gaddis Smith, Diane Bell, Robert J. Alexander, Gilbert Joseph, Paul Kennedy, and Thomas Wright for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

maintain their hold on power. Even without US assistance, it seems probable that a better strategy on the part of the *adeco* leadership, when the moment of crisis came in November 1948, would have given Venezuela's first democratic opening another chance.

In the spring of 1945, Ambassador Spruille Braden authored a memorandum arguing that liberal and democratic forces were the natural allies of the United States in Latin America, particularly for combating the danger of communism in the postwar period.² Circulated among the US ambassadors to Latin America by Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew, it soon won the support of a solid majority of its readers.³ Braden was appointed assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs in September 1945 and became the central figure shaping policy toward the region.⁴ 'I have always maintained', he warned after a year and a half in office, 'that to join with Fascists and ultra-reactionaries in "common cause" against Communism is against principle, foolhardy and will greatly weaken us in the struggle to defeat totalitarianism of every variety'.⁵

By the end of 1947, to judge from recently declassified records, Braden's cold war liberalism was also the dominant perspective among the officials of the recently established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA's provision of covert assistance to José Figueres and others on the democratic left in Latin America in the late 1950s and early 1960s is common knowledge, but analogous activities may well have been

² 'In this latter connection, we must not ignore what, as I have frequently reported, may prove in the post war era to be the most dangerous and insidious threat of all to the American mode of life and to democracy – Communism. And it is well to bear in mind that the laws of action and reaction cause the dictators to prepare the most fertile soil for that disruptive ideology.' Spruille Braden, 'Policy respecting dictatorships and disreputable governments.', 5 April 1945, p. 2, 711.00/4-545, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC [Hereafter NA].

³ See Joseph Grew to certain diplomatic missions, 28 May 1945, 711.00/5-2845, NA, and Division of American Republic Analysis and Liaison, 'Ambassador Braden's Proposed Policy Respecting Dictatorships and Disreputable Governments in the Other American Republics', Oct. 1945, in a file folder marked 'Dictatorships and Disreputable Governments', in Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for Inter-American Affairs, 1945–56, NA. Those favourable included ambassadors Claude Bowers (Chile), Hallett Johnson (Costa Rica), J. F. McGurk (Dominican Republic), William Dawson (Uruguay), Edwin Kyle (Guatemala), George Messersmith (Mexico), Orme Wilson (Haiti) and John Simmons (El Salvador). Those opposed included Ambassadors John C. White (Peru), Willard Beaulac (Paraguay), Walter Thurston (Bolivia) and John Erwin (Honduras). Among the critics, many wished to see the policy pursued multilaterally by the inter-American community as a whole rather than by the United States alone.

⁴ See S. Schwartzberg, 'The Civility of Yankee Imperialism: Democracy and American Policy in Latin America in the Truman Years', unpubl. PhD diss., Yale University, 1996.

⁵ Spruille Braden, 'Subject: Combating Communism', 12 May 1947, pp. 2–3, FW 810.00B/5-847, NA.

undertaken by the agency from the beginning of its existence.⁶ Rear Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the first director of the CIA, certainly saw himself and his agency as heavily indebted to Braden for his 'splendid support' in establishing what would become the various CIA stations in Latin America. Braden's help, Hillenkoetter informed him, 'has rendered our task much less difficult, and we feel that any success we may attain has been, to a large extent, due to you'.⁷ In any case, there can be no doubt that by the time of its report on the Venezuelan elections of December 1947, the CIA viewed Acción Democrática with enthusiasm: 'In fact, the great popular support won by the party in the December elections is another indication that, in the special conditions of Latin American politics, an active non-Communist progressive party constitutes one of the best guarantees against a strong Communist movement.'⁸

From the beginning of Betancourt's term in office in October 1945, he had publicly and repeatedly indicated that he was sympathetic to the United States and especially to the reformist tradition in US politics. General Douglas MacArthur, he observed in a nationwide radio address in mid-December 1945, was insisting on the abolition of the Japanese *latifundia*. If a US general who could hardly be characterised as an extremist was advocating agrarian reform in Japan, surely this urgent necessity could be addressed in Venezuela, particularly where the vast properties of the former dictator, Juan Vicente Gómez, were concerned.⁹

⁶ See C. D. Ameringer, *Don Pepe: A Political Biography of José Figueres of Costa Rica* (Albuquerque, 1978), pp. 163–226. Among other projects, the CIA supported a journal, *Combate*, whose managing editor was Luis Alberto Monge and whose editorial board consisted of Norman Thomas, José Figueres, Rómulo Betancourt and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. Whether all of these individuals knew of the ultimate source of the journal's funding is unclear. Figueres would later observe that he had approached the Agency, not the other way around, and would suggest that the outcry resulting from the disclosure of such activities in *Ramparts* magazine in 1967 was 'silly and adolescent'. Quoted in Ameringer, *Don Pepe*, p. 164.

⁷ R. H. Hillenkoetter to Spruille Braden, 16 July 1947, folder: 'Resignation', Box 22, Spruille Braden Papers, Butler Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY. At this time, Hillenkoetter was still head of the Central Intelligence Group (CIG) which would only become the CIA under section 102(f) of the National Security Act of 26 July 1947. See M. Warner (ed.), *The CIA Under Harry Truman* (Washington, 1994), p. 134 and *passim*.

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, 'The Venezuelan Elections of 14 Dec. 1947', ORE 65, 5 Jan. 1948, pp. 3–4, 'CIA Reports ORE 1948, 58–65', Box 256, President's Secretary's File, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.

⁹ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Versión taquigráfica del discurso radiodifundido a toda la Nación por los micrófonos de "La Voz del Táchira" en San Cristóbal', 14 Dec. 1945, in R. Betancourt, *Trayectoria democrática de una revolución* in two volumes (Caracas, 1948), Vol. 1, p. 20. By the end of 1947, a little more than 73,000 hectares had been distributed to some 6,000 peasants. During Betancourt's second term, a little more than a decade later, more than 1.5 million hectares would be distributed to more than 60,000 peasant families. R. J. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt and the Transformation of Venezuela* (New

A few weeks later, he publicly praised Braden for his liberal attitude and welcomed the US endorsement of an Uruguayan proposal calling for collective intervention on behalf of democracy and human rights. 'If intervention is collective', he declared, 'there is no danger whatever in it.'¹⁰ Antidemocratic regimes, he told an audience in Panama a few months later, were a threat which required a response:

As long as there is a single government in America which does not guarantee the free competition of political parties; which does not guarantee freedom of the press and the free spoken and written expression of all ideological currents; as long as there is a government which does not guarantee the Four Freedoms of Franklin Roosevelt, the freedom of the entire Continent will be threatened.¹¹

As early as 5 February 1946, in a remarkable conversation with Allan Dawson, the consul of the US embassy in Caracas, Betancourt had made it clear that his government considered its values and interests to be largely compatible with those of the United States and that he expected a strong measure of democratic solidarity from US officials. He began the conversation by saying that Juan Perón would undoubtedly win the upcoming elections in Argentina. In any fair elections he would be defeated, despite the weakness of the democratic candidate, but there was no chance of the elections being fair. 'Sr Betancourt expounded for some time on Perón and his machine. He characterised Perón as a Latin Huey Long in his rabble-rousing abilities and fascistic tendencies without the latter's saving grace of really having some interest in the common man.'¹²

Through his comments on a wide range of issues, over the course of this conversation, Betancourt appears as an eloquent vindication of the Braden Memorandum's emphasis on the role of Latin American liberals in the fight against both fascism and communism in the hemisphere.

Brunswick, 1982), pp. 271, 504. Technically, there was no *latifundia* in Japan. The land reform imposed by the US occupation transferred landownership from roughly 2,341,000 landlords to some 4,748,000 tenants. See Steven Schwartzberg, 'The "Soft Peace Boys": Presurrender Planning and Japanese Land Reform', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 185-216.

¹⁰ Quoted in Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 30 Jan. 1946, file: 13, Box 55, Donald M. Dozer Papers, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, CA. On the Uruguayan initiative and the responses it drew, see Unión Panamericana, *Consulta del gobierno del Uruguay y contestaciones de los gobiernos* (Washington, 1946).

¹¹ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Versión taquigráfica del discurso pronunciado en Panamá', 28 July 1946, *Trayectoria democrática de una revolución*, Vol. 2, p. 180.

¹² Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 8 Feb. 1946, 835.00/2-846, NA. In a cover letter for the copy which he sent to Braden, Dawson commented: 'I do think it is worthwhile for you to know what one of the brightest men around this section of Latin America thinks of the Argentine situation and its corollaries.' Allan Dawson to Spruille Braden, 9 Feb. 1946, 'Diplomatic Correspondence, 1946-47, A-D', Box 20, Braden Papers.

Turning to the situation in Chile, Sr Betancourt said that only a miracle and the decisiveness of the Socialist Party there had prevented 'Peronista' Army elements from taking over the country. The great difficulty in the recent past had been that the Socialist Party had played into the hands of the Communists, on the one hand, and the Fascists, on the other, by its policies. Bernardo Ibáñez was a very able man but he had made a fetish of the unity of the working classes which got him too tied to the Communists and enabled the reactionary forces to wave the red flag. Fortunately, on his recent visit to Venezuela, Ibáñez had seen that Acción Democrática had grown stronger, not weaker, by adopting a vigorous anti-Communist line and wresting control of labor unions from the Communists instead of letting them infiltrate into its own organization. Ibáñez had written him (Betancourt) several letters commenting upon his intention to follow Betancourt's policies in this particular; the entrance of the Socialist Party into the Chilean Cabinet and Ibáñez's break with the Communists on the subject of the general strike indicated that he really had changed his tactics.¹³

Having focused on Argentina, Betancourt suggested, the United States had left itself vulnerable to an Argentine propaganda which accused it of not being concerned with the other dictatorships of the hemisphere. This propaganda claimed that what the United States was really perturbed about was Argentine rivalry as an exporting nation.

The Argentines cleverly pointed to the fact that we had taken no similar steps against dictatorships in the Caribbean region, those of Chapita (Trujillo), Tacho (Somoza) and Tiburcio (Cariás), as proof that the form of government or the extent of civil liberties did not really interest us if we had control over the economic factors. He (Betancourt) and other liberals in Latin America, who knew something of history and the honesty and stability of our policies, realized the complete fallacy of the Argentine arguments but they had an insidious and very serious effect on many people who should know better and, above all, on the Latin American masses... While we and he (Betancourt) understood the difference between fascistic dictatorships and the old personalistic ones which were traditional in parts of the Americas, the average Latin American did not, never having had any close experience with fascism. In any event, when one had no civil rights, it made little difference whether the oppression came from a dictator who was just intent on filling his pockets and those of his friends or one who had an ideology better developed than that of the robber baron.¹⁴

The best answer to Argentine propaganda, Betancourt argued, would be to move more forcefully against the Caribbean dictatorships. To Dawson's claim that the United States already showed its support of democracy in its entire foreign policy, Betancourt replied that 'he thought

¹³ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 8 Feb. 1946, 835.00/2-846, NA. For the situation in Chile to which Betancourt refers, see Andrew Barnard, 'Chilean Communists, Radical Presidents and Chilean Relations with the United States, 1940-1947', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1981), pp. 359-60.

¹⁴ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 8 Feb. 1946, 835.00/2-846, NA.

we were trying to do so but that our international commitments prevented us from taking a clear line in much of the world; that, however, these considerations did not hold in the Americas where we had an open field unless we lost our moral leadership through lack of courage'. The Caribbean dictatorships were more vulnerable than Argentina to United States pressure, Betancourt maintained. 'If northern American were all democratic, the American republics save Argentina and its satellites could turn their attention to the peril of fascism in this hemisphere with clean hands and single purpose.'¹⁵

Betancourt's view of the United States – and of US–Latin American relations – had evolved along a path similar to that of the Peruvian social democrat Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, but with a significant detour.¹⁶ From its founding in 1931, until he left exile to return to Venezuela in 1936, Betancourt was active in the Costa Rican Communist Party, took a leading role in putting out its journal, *Trabajo*, and frequently attended meetings of its central executive committee.¹⁷ While he never publicly glorified totalitarian social control as Trotsky did, and never showed anything like Lenin's tremendous private contempt for human life, he did for a time agree with their fantastic vision of themselves as the leaders of a Soviet Union in the vanguard of a progressive and historically necessary global transformation.¹⁸ During this period, he became an articulate

¹⁵ *Ibid.* This was in many ways the same advice which Betancourt would give the somewhat similarly situated Kennedy administration fourteen years later. 'As for a hemisphere policy toward Castro', Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. recalled. 'Betancourt argued that if the OAS first took action against Trujillo it would be easier to unite the American republics against Castro.' A. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), p. 185.

¹⁶ The following interpretation of Betancourt's views is indebted to: Arturo Sosa A., 'Estudio introductorio' in Rómulo Betancourt, *La segunda independencia de Venezuela: compilación de la columna 'Economía y Finanzas' del diario 'Ahora,' 1937–1939* in three volumes (Caracas, 1992), Vol. 1, pp. 3–341; Aníbal Romero, Elizabeth Tinoco, and María Teresa Romero, 'Estudio preliminar' in Rómulo Betancourt, *Antología política, 1928–1935* (Caracas, 1990), pp. 7–39; A. Gómez, *Rómulo Betancourt y el Partido Comunista de Costa Rica, 1931–1935* (Caracas, 1985); and Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*.

¹⁷ See Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 74–5, and Gómez, *Rómulo Betancourt y el Partido Comunista de Costa Rica*, pp. 11–15 and *passim*.

¹⁸ Trotsky's succinct defence of totalitarianism is unrivaled on the antidemocratic left: 'The foundations of the militarization of labor are those forms of State compulsion without which the replacement of capitalist economy by the Socialist will forever remain an empty sound. Why do we speak of *militarization*? Of course, this is only an analogy – but an analogy very rich in content. No social organization except the army has ever considered itself justified in subordinating citizens to itself in such a measure, and to control them by its will on all sides to such a degree, as the State of the proletarian dictatorship considers itself justified in doing, and does. Only the army – just because in its way it used to decide questions of the life or death of nations, States, and ruling classes – was endowed with powers of demanding from each and all complete submission to its problems, aims, regulations and orders.' L. Trotsky,

member of the antidemocratic left – someone who clearly expressed the view that democracy itself would ultimately be an obstacle to the kind of social revolution which was desperately needed. At most, democracy and piecemeal reforms could be supported as a tactical manoeuvre in the broader struggle for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is clearly evident in a letter of his of 2 August 1935 to his close friend and comrade Raúl Leoni:

Remember what I told you in an earlier letter: to launch a programme to conquer the masses without bourgeois-democratic slogans, in a despotised country like Venezuela, would be like jumping into the river to swim with one's arms tied behind one's back. It is not necessary to speak of the conception we have of putrid bourgeois democracy. It is not necessary to say that we, communists, see in it nothing but a more or less cunning veil for the dictatorship of a handful of imperialists and millionaires. The backward masses of a country where the prevailing regime has not allowed the proletariat to educate itself politically do not reason thus. They have constitutional illusions, faith in democracy. And even more than the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie, which – in conformity with Lenin's already classic schema – weighs most heavily in the bourgeois-democratic stage of the revolution. Our attitude in this situation cannot be to say: bourgeois democracy is a swindle; we struggle not for bourgeois democracy, but for soviet power. That is, to my way of thinking, a mechanical, and not a dialectical, means of posing the question.¹⁹

A better approach, Betancourt continued, would be to put forward a minimum programme calling for a 'civil' and 'alternative' government, and elementary economic reform such as an eight-hour day, while connecting this programme to a maximum programme for the education of the masses and the conquest of power. This was the approach which had worked for the Bolsheviks in Russia, Betancourt insisted, and he and Leoni and their comrades should make use of this rich experience in Venezuela.²⁰

Betancourt did voice some criticisms of Stalin during his years on the antidemocratic left, and many criticisms of the Comintern, but these had more to do with tactics than strategy.²¹ He was far more fundamentally

Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky [1920] with a foreword by M. Shachtman (Ann Arbor, 1961), p. 141. For Lenin's contempt for human life, see the documents in R. Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven, 1996). On Betancourt's view of Lenin and Trotsky as bringing Russia into the vanguard of the struggle for world socialism, see Rómulo Betancourt to Antonio García, 28 Nov. 1932, in Betancourt, *Antología política, 1928-1935*, p. 430.

¹⁹ Rómulo Betancourt to Raúl Leoni, 12 Oct. 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 511-12.

²⁰ Rómulo Betancourt to Raúl Leoni, 12 Oct. 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 512-13.

²¹ Although Betancourt described his position as caught between two fronts: the right and the ultra-left, Wall Street and Moscow, he found the latter much less threatening. He thought that the Bolshevik Revolution had entered a Thermidorian phase and that

critical of the United States. His changing conception of the problem of Yankee imperialism, and the means by which it might be overcome, defined the trajectory of his political outlook as he moved from a communist to a social democratic perspective. A close examination of this ideological journey sheds light on both worldviews and on the radically different meanings which 'anti-imperialism' could have for each one. It also suggests that despite the fundamental ideological dichotomy, there was a common desire for a social transformation which would benefit the mass of humanity – a desire which facilitated Betancourt's movement from one position to the other.

The social democratic position in Latin American politics in the early 1930s was articulated most forcefully by Haya de la Torre and the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana or Apra.²² Campaigning for the presidency of Peru in August 1931, Haya declared that while capitalism was sick, the remedy the communists offered would be worse than the illness.²³ 'We must not forget', he warned a crowd of his supporters, 'that communism and fascism are extremes that meet in a deformed, totalitarian and tyrannical vision of the state. Our mission, the mission of America and of Peru, is to save our peoples from the disgrace of despotism as much as from misery and backwardness.'²⁴

As far as the *apristas* were concerned, there were two great competing interpretations of Marxism in the world: social democratic and communist. To charges that Apra was 'communist', Haya would respond that anyone with the remotest familiarity with international politics knew that there were fundamental differences among Marxists:

There are two great Marxist schools and two great Marxist Internationals: the Second International of Amsterdam and the Third International of Moscow. One is reformist, evolutionary, autonomist. The other is revolutionary and Bolshevik. The socialist parties of France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Argentina, and the Independent Labour Party in England all belong to the Second International. They are neither revolutionary nor communist. Blum, Kautsky, Bebel,

Stalin – having dedicated himself to the idiocy of 'building socialism in one country' – was a Bonaparte without Bonaparte's expansionary ambitions. See Rómulo Betancourt to Germán Herrera Umérez, 13 Aug. 1931, and Rómulo Betancourt to Antonio García, 28 Nov. 1932, in Betancourt, *Antología política, 1928–1935*, pp. 308, 431.

²² On Haya and Apra, see Schwartzberg, 'The Civility of Yankee Imperialism', pp. 178–95.

²³ Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, speech of 11 Aug. 1931, quoted in Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, 'Treinta años de aprismo' [1955], in Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre *Obras completas* in seven volumes (Lima, 1977), Vol. 6, pp. 424–5.

²⁴ Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, speech of 20 Aug. 1931, text in Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, 'Política aprista', *Obras completas*, Vol. 5, p. 48.

Vandervelde, Justo and Maxton are all Marxists. Kautsky was a personal friend and disciple of Marx and Engels and is the executor of their papers. None of them are communists. Those who have read Lenin's and Trotsky's attacks on the socialists or the social democrats know this well.²⁵

Initially, Betancourt appears to have been drawn to social democracy. In 1928, he helped lead student demonstrations against the twenty-year-old dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez and participated in an attempted coup against the regime.²⁶ In exile in Costa Rica the following year, he became active in the Costa Rican section of Apra.²⁷ He remained close to the *apristas* until 1932 and later in life would maintain an essentially *aprista* position. From 1932 until sometime after 1935, however, he accepted a communist rather than an *aprista* view of Yankee imperialism.

For the *apristas*, anything which contributed to the unity of Latin America, and to the triumph of genuine national sovereignty and economic and social progress within the individual countries of Latin America, was anti-imperialist.²⁸ Yankee imperialism came about because Latin America was weak, fragmented and semi-feudal while the United States was strong, cohesive and economically advanced. If the traditional obstacles to Latin America's progress were overcome, the threat of Yankee imperialism would be overcome with them. If they were not, Yankee imperialism would be able to absorb Latin America and make of it what it would. With an *aprista* party in power, foreign investment and trade could help to overcome imperialism – dialectically – by contributing to the abolition of feudalism within a social context in which a popular and nationalist party was carrying out social reforms. Greater progress was not possible as long as capitalism remained dominant in the metropolitan countries. From a communist perspective, in contrast, Latin America's backwardness and semicolonial position was caused by capitalism. Only the defeat of capitalism could overcome imperialism. Only actions which contributed to that goal could be called anti-imperialist. There could always be tactical compromises, but – since capitalism was by nature parasitic – there could never be mutually beneficial relations with it. Those who were genuinely opposed to Yankee imperialism had to ally themselves with the global movement which would bring about its overthrow – the global movement constituted by the Communist International. By 1932, Haya de la Torre represented one perspective and Betancourt had come to articulate the other.

²⁵ Quoted in M. Seoane, *Las calumnias contra el aprismo* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1932), p. 34.

²⁶ Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 35–47.

²⁷ Gómez, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 30.

²⁸ The *aprista* views in this paragraph are a summary of arguments contained in Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, 'El anti-imperialismo y el Apra' [written 1928, published 1936], *Obras completas*, Vol. 4, especially pp. 89, 120–124, 150, 157, 177ff, 185.

The reasons for Betancourt's oscillation between an *aprista* and a communist position remain somewhat obscure. The social democratic character of Haya's ideology was just beginning to be clearly articulated when Betancourt joined the Costa Rican section of Apra. That section dissolved soon after his arrival in the country, in any case, and most of the membership joined the newly formed Communist Party (CP). There was, as Alejandro Gómez has observed, no other leftist political group in Costa Rica with which Betancourt could have been active.²⁹ But local conditions were only a part of the picture. Betancourt wanted very much to maintain political solidarity with a group of Venezuelan friends in exile in Colombia, a group which included Raúl Leoni, Ricardo Montilla, and Valmore Rodríguez.³⁰ He feared that they might become a mere collection of intellectuals without a political party. Together, he hoped, they would constitute an anti-Stalinist revolutionary group at the margin of the Third International which could take over the Venezuelan CP.³¹ His involvement in the Costa Rican CP was in effect a model for this endeavour.

Betancourt combined an unusually strong faith that radical change was necessary with an equally strong conviction that politics was a practical vocation. In the early 1930s, the Costa Rican CP could seem congenial to such a temperament. It maintained a fair degree of autonomy from the Comintern, both tactically and doctrinally, and was willing to allow a Venezuelan exile like Betancourt a leading role.³² Ultimately, however, someone with Betancourt's pragmatic bent was bound to be alienated by the dogmatism and impracticality of communist politics. From the beginning, he was frustrated with the Comintern:

The Caribbean Bureau of the International is the most perfect example which one could give of stupidity and vain verbosity. To date, after almost a year of contact with the group here, it has not been able to reach agreement with it. This is because what they call 'accepting the line of the International' amounts to accepting, without the benefit of an inventory, all of the abstract clichés – a hundred miles and more removed from reality – that are cranked out on copy sheets in New York. Without any resolution of the essential points, they continue, undaunted, to send the same directives with every mailing: on such and such a day, great(!) mass demonstrations of workers against the danger of imperialist war on the Soviet Union; on such and such a day, a meeting of protest in front of the American Legation over the murder of the Scottsboro Negroes.

²⁹ Gómez, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 30, 44.

³⁰ Valmore Rodríguez would be the interior minister in the first AD government and Raúl Leoni would be the minister of labour. In the 1960s, Leoni would succeed Betancourt as president of the republic.

³¹ Rómulo Betancourt to Valmore Rodríguez, Ricardo Montilla and Raúl Leoni, 3 May 1932, in Betancourt, *Antología política*, pp. 354–5.

³² For an excellent discussion of the Costa Rican CP's heterodoxies, see Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 67–86. The best discussion of Betancourt's role in the party is Gómez, *Rómulo Betancourt*.

All of this leaves the impression of a suffocating bureaucratism: of a disdain for fundamental questions in favour of a preoccupation with what is mechanical and formalistic – with the politics of mimeographed circulars.³³

Writing for *Repertorio Americano*, in March 1930, Betancourt had shown nothing but admiration for Haya de la Torre as a leader whose name was ‘tied to every effort in these times for Latin American emancipation’.³⁴ Haya and José Carlos Mariátegui ‘embodied the thought of a new generation’, he wrote in another article later that year.³⁵ In a letter to two Peruvian friends in May 1931, he promised to keep writing on behalf of their cause both because it was just and because Apra was the only Peruvian party which would, on reaching power, help the Venezuelans to make their own revolution.³⁶ In the summer of 1931, a month after the founding of the Costa Rican CP, Betancourt could still call a comrade’s attention to the profound lack of militant figures in Latin America capable of realising a programme for change once they had political power:

Of the few that there are, the most capable is Haya de la Torre, the current candidate of the Peruvian left for the presidency of the republic; and precisely because he is so valuable, there has descended over his person, his work, and his ideology – very similar to ours, I might add – all of the virulent phobias of the embarrassed reds. They call him a ‘sissy’ because he does not frequent cabarets; Gustavo Machado, in contrast, the maximum leader of Venezuelan communism, confuses revolution with the tango ... We have gained nothing by calling ourselves ‘comrades’ and believing ourselves united in a single ideological front if this makes fundamental methods of appraisal and tactical determination more difficult.³⁷

Yet by May 1932, Betancourt could write to his closest Venezuelan comrades in Colombia that his illusions about *aprismo* had been completely dispelled. What he had taken to be a tactic of the moment, something adopted prior to a frankly revolutionary position, he was now convinced was a firmly established reformist strategy.³⁸ In spite of this judgement, his attitude toward Apra remained ambiguous for several months and

³³ Rómulo Betancourt to Rodríguez, Ricardo Montilla and Raúl Leoni, 27 Jan. 1932, in Betancourt, *Antología política*, p. 335. Although some of the Scottsboro defendants had been sentenced to death at the time Betancourt was writing, they were ultimately released after the Supreme Court reversed their convictions on procedural grounds and one of the alleged rape victims recanted her testimony.

³⁴ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘Panorama de los movimientos estudiantiles de Latinoamérica y sus proyecciones’, 15 and 22 March 1930 [in *Repertorio Americano*], *ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁵ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘La verdad sobre la situación del Perú’, 19 Nov. 1930 [in *La Prensa* of Bogotá] *ibid.*, p. 221. Mariátegui was a founder of the Peruvian Communist Party.

³⁶ Rómulo Betancourt to Magda Portal and Serafín del Mar, 23 May 1931, *ibid.*, p. 267.

³⁷ Rómulo Betancourt to Germán Herrera Umérez, 29 July 1931, *ibid.*, p. 300.

³⁸ Rómulo Betancourt to Valmore Rodríguez, Ricardo Montilla and Raúl Leoni, 3 May 1932, *ibid.*, p. 361.

there is some evidence that he felt forced to trim his sails to meet the wind in his criticisms of the movement. Members of the Venezuelan CP had been denouncing him, and his comrades in Colombia, and the Comintern had written the Costa Rican CP 'sending a kind of questionnaire about my activities, my position within the party, about the attitude I have adopted toward the Venezuelan revolution and the CP'.³⁹ He may, accordingly, have felt under some pressure to criticise an organisation which was anathema to the Comintern. But it was precisely his comrades in Colombia who were most influential in getting him to denounce *aprismo*. In a letter of October 1932 to one of his less radical colleagues, he bemoaned the fact that Peruvian friends of his such as Magda Portal and Luis Alberto Sánchez no longer replied to his letters. He would have given them indications of his sympathy for *aprismo*, he wrote, but his position was compromised.

I could not tell them why, but you I can tell. It has to do with the group of *compañeros* in Colombia – Leoni, Montilla, etc. – they sent me a serious reprimand for the enthusiasm which I had 'casually' demonstrated for a party which was following, as they saw it, a policy which was too equilibristic; a line too sinuous and of little consequence ... To be sure, *compañero*, I am incapable of believing such idiocies as: '*aprismo*: an instrument of English imperialism', etc.; but I could not deny that the observations of the *compañeros* in Colombia reinforced a conception which I was already forming: that *aprismo*, with its policy of a liberally interpreted united front, had allowed social sectors within its ranks which would inhibit an effectively revolutionary policy. What do you think on this point? Tell me with complete frankness how it looks to you.⁴⁰

Despite Betancourt's ambivalences, and the complexities of his political situation – both within the Costa Rican CP and among the Venezuelan exiles – there is no reason to doubt that by May of 1932, and for several years thereafter, his views were sincerely irreconcilable with *aprismo*. A Peruvian *aprista*'s description of their goal as a 'functional democracy' with a 'mutual control of classes', particularly irked him.⁴¹ By this time he believed that there was ultimately only one class which should rule. It

³⁹ Rómulo Betancourt to Hermanitos (Raúl Leoni, Ricardo Montilla and Valmore Rodríguez), 19 May 1932, quoted in Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Rómulo Betancourt to Mariano Picón Salas, 12 Oct. 1932, in Betancourt, *Antología política*, p. 426. Since the original Apra platform had only specified action against Yankee imperialism, a standard communist claim was that Apra was covertly allied with the British.

⁴¹ Rómulo Betancourt to Valmore Rodríguez, Ricardo Montilla and Raúl Leoni, 3 May 1932, *ibid.*, p. 361. The work which most bothered Betancourt seems to have been: Manuel Seoane, *Las calumnias contra el aprismo* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1932). On the one side, as Seoane comments on page 34, were the Russian bolsheviks who favoured the immediate dictatorship of the proletariat and violent transformation. On the other, 'almost all of the European socialist parties, advocates of the democratic system and of evolutionary transformation'.

was this belief in the proletariat's exclusive claim to legitimate authority in society (in practice the exclusive claim of the vanguard party), which was at the centre of the antidemocratic left's ideology for most of the twentieth century. Leszek Kolakowski has suggested that this belief rested, in turn, on a deep-seated tendency within Marxism to define human progress in terms of the establishment of a unity of civil and political society and that logically the aspiration for such unity must be rejected by any democrat.⁴² Certainly, a desire for the exclusive rule of the proletariat was at the heart of Betancourt's most extensive expression of his views while a leader of the Costa Rican CP, the pamphlet: 'Whom We Are With and Whom We Are Against.'⁴³

Presenting his perspective in a broad historical context, Betancourt described the period of the War of Independence in Venezuela – and by extension in Latin America – as a French Revolution which had failed: a revolution which had not established an autonomous industrialism, on a national capitalist base, capable of sustaining a powerful liberal bourgeoisie and a stable institutional order. The bourgeoisie of the period had made a grave tactical error. Rather than rule as a class for itself, it had allied with the old feudal elements in an effort to rule through the military. The resultant *caudillaje* had led to backwardness and barbarism. Extortion and monopolies, rather than free trade and free industry, had introduced capitalism. The presidency of the republic had become the culmination of a successful military career and the formation of the political consciousness of the masses had been impeded. Into this backward economy with its correlative political superstructure had come colonising capital: imperialism. It had further deformed the economy with its typical tendency toward monoculture and had tied it to a single industry: petroleum.⁴⁴

Haya de la Torre – hoping to persuade the United States government to accept and cooperate with a reformist government which he would lead – was willing to sit down and talk with the US ambassador to Peru.⁴⁵

⁴² See Leszek Kolakowski, 'The Myth of Human Self-Identity: Unity of Civil and Political Society in Socialist Thought', in Leszek Kolakowski and Stuart Hampshire (eds.), *The Socialist Idea: A Reappraisal* (New York, 1974), especially pp. 24–5.

⁴³ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Con quién estamos y contra quién estamos', May 1932 [in *Venezuela Futura*] in Betancourt, *Antología política*, pp. 378–400. Alexander follows Betancourt's misleading recollection of this document as attacking both conservative and communist positions. While it did attack a 'New York' communist position, it also put forward a Venezuelan one – Betancourt's. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Betancourt, 'Con quién estamos y contra quién estamos', pp. 379–81.

⁴⁵ The US ambassador, Fred Morris Dearing, after meeting with Haya, wrote an enthusiastic report to the State Department: 'While talking to me, Haya de la Torre gave me the impression of relaxation, and while I was conscious of his intensity of purpose and have the evidence of the last few months to show that he is a man of ability and has the respect of his fellow-citizens, I am still uncertain as to whether I should say that he is a man of destiny or not. From what I know up to this point, however, I

Betancourt had not the slightest desire to do anything similar: 'The Yankee government is not "democratic" nor is it "great". It is an oligarchy of Quakers and adventurous and unscrupulous Jews which has committed, is currently committing, and is disposed to commit at every moment, the worst acts of banditry against our disorganised Latin American peoples.'⁴⁶ The contrast between Haya's and Betancourt's positions was not rooted in different interpretations of the Good Neighbour Policy, the New Deal, or the threat posed by Nazism. All of these things were still in the future. It was rooted in their conception of Yankee imperialism and the means by which it might be overcome. Haya saw the possibility of utilising the positive aspects of Yankee imperialism in a dialectical effort to overcome it. Under such a scenario, social democratic movements in Latin America would become the heirs of capitalism, rather than its assassins. He was confident that the political triumph of a social democratic party would be a great victory for anti-imperialism. While Betancourt would adopt a similar approach a little more than a dozen years later, in 1932 he considered such reformism – by definition – as a profound betrayal of anti-imperialism. 'Independently of the capacity for sacrifice and the ingenuous good faith of some of its

should think that if he should become president of Peru, we should have nothing to fear and on the contrary might expect an excellent and beneficent administration of strongly liberal tendencies in which justice in the main would be done, and a period of confidence and well being be initiated.' Ambassador Fred Morris Dearing to the Secretary of State, 7 Sept. 1931, 810.43 APRA/102. Quoted in T. M. Davies, Jr., *Indian Integration in Peru: A Half Century of Experience, 1900–1948* (Lincoln, 1974), pp. 110–11.

⁴⁶ Betancourt, 'Con quién estamos y contra quién estamos', p. 397. The use of 'Quakers' and 'Jews' as part of a derogatory stereotype was not common in Betancourt's writing. This is the only example with which I am familiar. It may have reflected nothing more than the kind of simplistic association of 'race' with economic backwardness or success which was common at the time. On the other hand, such formulations were not unheard of on the antidemocratic left and Marx had set a particularly nasty precedent in an early formulation of his desire for the unity of civil and political society: 'Christianity is the sublime thought of Judaism; Judaism is the vulgar practical application of Christianity. But this practical application could only become universal after Christianity as the perfect religion had completed, in a theoretical manner, the self-alienation of man from himself and from nature. Only then could Judaism attain general domination and make externalized man and externalized nature into alienable, saleable objects, a prey to the slavery of egoistic need and the market... As soon as society manages to abolish the empirical essence of Judaism, the market and its presuppositions, the Jew becomes impossible, for his mind no longer has an object, because the subjective basis of Judaism, practical need, has become humanized, and because the conflict of man's individual, material existence with his species-existence has been superseded. The social emancipation of the Jew implies the emancipation of society from Judaism.' Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' [written in 1843] in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 61–2.

honoured leaders', he wrote in early 1933, 'Apra is a reformist and opportunistic party which, by failing to situate itself in the camp of the proletariat and its ideology, has objectively fallen into the opposing camp of capitalism.'⁴⁷

To agree with Haya that it was possible to establish mutually beneficial relations with the United States was to agree that it was possible to have mutually beneficial relations with capitalism. This was the exact opposite of what Betancourt then considered to be political wisdom:

At base, all of our social problems are aspects of the universal conflict between the forces that create wealth – the workers – and those that exploit wealth and its creators for the benefit of parasitic minorities – the capitalists. From this perspective, we see that Gómez and his regime and its passionate defenders within the country are all part of a vast international system of organised exploitation. We derive as a first consequence of this theoretical conception – which is neither an *a priori* nor a sentimental conception, but one extracted dialectically from our reality – an active position of struggle not only against the transitory political regime denominated 'Gómez', but also against the fundamental economic constants, the permanent determinants, of governments of his type. For that reason, beyond the destruction by revolutionary means of the despotism, we seek the destruction of its social base – the capitalist–*caudillista* alliance. Our irreconcilable enemies, in consequence, are: (a) The international imperialist bourgeoisie, indirect ruler of our economy, and its native allies: the national class of large landowners together with the great figures of commerce and industry; and (b) the military *caudillaje*.⁴⁸

Both communists and *apristas* called themselves 'anti-imperialists', but the term's meaning had relatively little common import within their antagonistic ideologies. The *apristas* were committed to a vision of political democracy in which multiple classes and multiple parties had rights and interests which had to be at least partly reconciled. They believed that Apra should be a multiclass party and that on reaching power it should seek to establish mutually beneficial relations with the United States. They held that it was simply impossible for Latin Americans to destroy a capitalist economic system whose roots were in other continents. 'We must be ready to confront the inevitable crisis of the system', Haya urged his supporters, 'but also to utilise its technological and progressive contributions, to control its excesses and impede its abuses, and to organise the economies of our peoples from the perspective that the crisis of capitalism will be a long one.' There was nothing to be gained by looking to the Russian revolution as it was not going to supplant capitalism, sick as it was, and in any case offered a remedy which

⁴⁷ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Guerra civil en el Perú y posición del partido aprista', 19 March 1933 [in *Trabajo*] in Betancourt, *Antología política*, pp. 470–1.

⁴⁸ Betancourt, 'Con quién estamos y contra quién estamos', pp. 397–8.

would be 'worse than the sickness and far from a constructive and salvatory economic and social order for the world'.⁴⁹

For communists like Betancourt, in contrast, it was the global communist movement which would bring an end to imperialism. It was the exclusive rule of the proletariat which would bring genuine human emancipation:

It will be the working classes, revolutionarily oriented, rigorously disciplined, dignified by the awareness of their destiny and by the unshakeable conviction that the logic of history designates them as the successors of the bourgeoisie in the government of peoples, who, on coming to power, will realise our national possibilities, forging a new type of state, socialist and antiimperialist – an instrument of the people for the achievement of social justice.⁵⁰

Throughout his time on the antidemocratic left, Betancourt generally sought publicly to downplay the antagonism between communism and social democracy in the interest of furthering his movement's chances of acquiring political power (and perhaps also of winning social democrats over to a communist position), but his ability to pursue such a course before the Comintern changed tactics and adopted the popular front was severely circumscribed. Welcoming the opening to *aprimismo* when the party-line changed, Betancourt wound up being persuaded by events – and perhaps by those *apristas* he had sought to persuade – that he and not they had been mistaken.⁵¹

With the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935, a period of political opening and social reform began in Venezuela under General Eleázar López Contreras.⁵² Betancourt soon emerged as a major figure among those pressing for greater democratisation. Here his interest in practical politics brought him into conflict with others whom he would later describe as following a policy 'which did not agitate consciences toward justice, but rather passions toward demagoguery'.⁵³ When the new regime cracked down somewhat in 1937, Betancourt went underground until he was finally caught at the end of 1939 and briefly exiled. He

⁴⁹ Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, speech of 11 Aug. 1931, quoted in Haya, 'Treinta años de aprismo', *Obras completas*, Vol. 6, pp. 424–5.

⁵⁰ Betancourt, 'Con quién estamos y contra quién estamos', p. 400.

⁵¹ For Betancourt's enthusiasm with the popular front, and the opening to Apra in particular, see Rómulo Betancourt to Raúl Leoni, 12 Oct. 1935, in Betancourt, *Antología política*, pp. 518–21. See also Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 64.

⁵² In *Venezuela: Política y petróleo*, as Arturo Sosa observes, Betancourt attempted to portray López Contreras' regime as little more than a prolongation of the Gómez dictatorship. A very different picture emerges from his contemporary newspaper columns. See Arturo Sosa, 'Estudio introductorio', in Betancourt, *La segunda independencia de Venezuela*, pp. 327–8.

⁵³ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Venezuela: tierra de riqueza y pauperismo', 25 Feb. 1939, *ibid.*, p. 88. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 88–114.

returned to Venezuela in February 1941 when General Isafías Medina Angarita was beginning his electoral campaign to succeed López Contreras. During his time underground, Betancourt severed his remaining relations with the Venezuelan CP and authored more than six hundred columns for the newspaper *Ahora*.⁵⁴ Although he was in hiding, and his 'Economy and Finances' column was technically anonymous, it contributed substantially to his growing reputation – particularly as the police did not seem to be able to catch him. In these columns, with a tone which was fairly free of hortatory exaggerations, Betancourt increasingly articulated an *aprista* position, both economically and politically.

International commercial relations had to be based on strict reciprocity, Betancourt argued in March 1937, if they were to be stable and mutually beneficial.⁵⁵ Free trade was doubtless a just and reasonable policy, but since all of the great economies of the world had forsaken it, there was nothing for a small country to do but follow the established path. This meant that it was neither logical nor just to purchase so much in Japan when that country purchased so little in Venezuela, nor to purchase textiles, machinery and tools in the United Kingdom when that country would buy neither Venezuelan coffee nor cocoa. It was more natural to buy in Germany, France or the United States – countries with a strong demand for Venezuelan products – or in Denmark, Finland and Norway where a favourable balance of trade offered a field for the development of Venezuelan production.⁵⁶ Trade with the United States was to be particularly encouraged:

We buy most of the machinery and manufactured goods which we consume in the United States and this is natural by proximity and because the United States receives, without limitations, the greater part of our products. Everything suggests that commercial relations between the two countries will grow in importance and we believe that our government should persistently encourage that growth with every means available to it while always maintaining our freedom of action and our choice of markets.⁵⁷

On numerous occasions during this underground period, Betancourt indicated that he remained concerned about the dangers posed by colonising capital. Roosevelt's 'good neighbourliness' was too evident to be denied, he wrote in October 1939, but the attitude of those on Wall Street was different: 'they are dedicated to exploiting us with the same

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the break between Betancourt's group and the communists, and of the importance of his 'Economy and Finances' column, see Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 118–47.

⁵⁵ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Venezuela y el Japón', 21 March 1937, in Betancourt, *La segunda independencia*, Vol. 1, p. 359.

⁵⁶ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Nuestro comercio exterior', 24 March 1937, *ibid.*, pp. 361–2.

⁵⁷ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Los tratados de reciprocidad', 27 March 1937, *ibid.*, p. 364.

enthusiasm, and with the same avid rapacity, as they demonstrated in the days when a Coolidge or a Hoover was in the White House.⁵⁸ The countries of Latin America, he suggested, should take advantage of the fact that Roosevelt was in the White House to free themselves – to the extent that such economically backward countries could free themselves – from the tutelage of foreign capital.⁵⁹ Companies like United Fruit had attempted to constitute a state within a state in the countries in which they operated and there was, therefore, good reason to establish the Venezuelan banana industry without foreign capital.⁶⁰ As far as Venezuelan oil was concerned, the foreign companies were interested in exploiting it as rapidly as possible. Venezuela, in contrast, should be interested in using its oil wealth over time to develop other industries and agriculture as well. This could hardly be done with the low taxes and salaries which prevailed in the oil industry. If the minimum paid to an oil worker in the United States was \$4.00 a day, Betancourt argued, surely the Venezuelan oil workers were not being unreasonable in asking for \$3.33.⁶¹

‘We recognise the need, because of our backwardness, for the foreign capital and the advanced technology of the highly industrialised countries’, Betancourt wrote in the spring of 1939. ‘But we insist on regulating this imported capital so that it respects the dignity of the national workers it employs.’⁶² Nationalisation of the Venezuelan oil industry was simply not yet a viable option.⁶³ Moreover, even where oil had been nationalised, as in Mexico, there was still a need for foreign capital. Foreign investors, Betancourt predicted, would continue to make a profit in Mexico, and the oil industry there would continue to benefit from their expertise, but it would be on the basis of a negotiated arrangement with a social democratic and antiimperialist state.⁶⁴

Betancourt commented favourably on Roosevelt’s observation that the abuses of capital, if unchecked, could bring capitalism itself to an end. Where he had previously welcomed the prospect of such a demise, he now saw hope instead in the fact that there were people of vision who without

⁵⁸ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘La proposición venezolana en la conferencia de Panamá’, 4 Oct. 1939, *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 451.

⁵⁹ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘América Latina y la política emprestista de los Estados Unidos’, 11 May 1939, *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁶⁰ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘Con capitales nacionales debe fomentarse la industria bananera’, 14 Oct. 1937, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 622–3.

⁶¹ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘Nuestra producción de petróleo crudo’, 26 Sept. 1937, *ibid.*, pp. 592–4.

⁶² Rómulo Betancourt, ‘La empresa “Gran Ferrocarril de Venezuela” y sus abusos intolerables’, 3 March 1939, *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 98.

⁶³ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘Hacia la explotación nacional de nuestro petróleo’, 24 and 25 Jan. 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

⁶⁴ Rómulo Betancourt, ‘La expropiación petrolera mexicana y las perspectivas de un arreglo con las Compañías yanquis’, 20 March 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 124–6.

renouncing their adhesion to the established social order sought to modernise and humanise it.⁶⁵ Roosevelt, he wrote, had recognised that the old economics had failed and had sought to move beyond it. That supply and demand ought to regulate prices, that the state is a bad administrator, that only private initiative is progressive, all of these dogmas had disappeared internationally.⁶⁶ There was no longer any question as to whether the state would intervene in the economy. The question was whether the state which intervened would be democratic and progressive or fascist and reactionary.⁶⁷

Fascism, as far as Betancourt was concerned, was a new and threatening form of economic despotism in which the state intervened on behalf of reactionary interests. As an example, he described the many ways in which fascist powers in Europe – while claiming to uphold private property – were in fact dispossessing the Jews in those countries of their belongings.⁶⁸ British policy, which had taken a harder line against the nationalisation of Mexican oil than against fascist aggression in Czechoslovakia, disgusted him.⁶⁹ He was sympathetic to Roosevelt's argument, in his Quarantine Address, that aggressor states should be cut off from the rest of the world. The fact that the Soviet Union was unwilling to go along with such a policy he considered irrelevant:

The attitude which the Soviet Union adopts means nothing to those who have never looked to Moscow for signs to inform their judgement. For this reason Venezuelan democracy – which in its most dense sector is not communist – will continue to staunchly defend the thesis that aggressor states should be surrounded and immobilised by the most rigorous economic boycott.⁷⁰

If war was to break out, Betancourt observed in late August 1939, the United States might well follow the same course it had followed during the First World War and not enter the conflict immediately. Latin America would then be faced with a situation in which the United States would constitute practically the only market for its products and the only source of the manufactured goods which it imported. With sufficient economic coordination, it would be possible to establish a tolerable autarchy in the New World. In working for such an arrangement, Latin

⁶⁵ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Una frase de Roosevelt', 7 Jan. 1938, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 10–12.

⁶⁶ Rómulo Betancourt, 'La nacionalización de los ferrocarriles franceses', 3 Sept. 1937, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 555–6.

⁶⁷ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Economía dirigida frente a economía', 5 Jan. 1938, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁸ Rómulo Betancourt, 'El "antisemitismo" fórmula del despojo económico', *ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 59–61.

⁶⁹ Rómulo Betancourt, 'La expropiación petrolera mexicana y las perspectivas de un arreglo con las Compañías yanquis', 20 March 1939, *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷⁰ Rómulo Betancourt, 'La "Standard Oil" en la picota de la opinión norteamericana', 16 Sept. 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 430–1.

American economic interests would be served by the formation of a bloc in which to negotiate. Given the danger of fascist aggression, however, it would be necessary for this bloc to conclude not only an economic agreement with the United States, but a defensive alliance as well:

This alliance would exclude the presence of Yankee or British marines on our territories on the pretext of defending North American and British investments. It would also meet the danger of a situation of colonial dependency – once the United States and Great Britain had emerged, fortified, from a triumph over the Axis Powers – by a defensive force which could quickly deploy 100 million men ready and willing to defend the sovereignty of each and every one of our twenty-one nationalities, fragments of the great and single Bolivarian fatherland.⁷¹

A few months after writing this, Betancourt was again in exile. This time in Chile where he forged close ties to the Chilean Socialist Party. The Hitler–Stalin Pact had led the communist parties of Latin America to claim that the Second World War was just another imperialist conflict, like the First World War, and that the countries of the New World ought to stay out of it.⁷² This, in turn, had led to a bitter dispute between the Chilean Socialist and Communist Parties and to considerable controversy on the Latin American left in general. In part in response to this controversy – and with the help of the Peruvian *aprista* leader, Magda Portal, the Argentine socialist leader, Leonilda Barrancos, and a number of Chilean socialists – Betancourt organised a congress of democratic and popular Latin American parties. Held in Santiago from 3 to 8 October 1940, it adopted resolutions arguing that there was a fundamental difference between democracy and fascism and urging the establishment of a defensive entente between the two Americas. Denouncing Betancourt for this position in April 1941, the Venezuelan communist newspaper, *El*

⁷¹ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Entente económica y defensiva interamericana con Estados Unidos', 31 Aug. 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 411–13. Although the context provides no evidence, one may assume that the twenty-first nationality was Puerto Rican.

⁷² Vicente Lombardo Toledano, for example, insisted that the Second World War was the product of the global decay of the bourgeois system and that while those who had provoked it claimed it was a war between fascism and democracy, this was not the case: 'The repression against the labour movement, the abolition of labour laws, the deprivation of individual and collective liberties in England and France have already reached the situation of the German people under Hitler's regime. In these moments, there is no essential difference between a bourgeois–democratic regime converted into a dictatorship and a fascist regime: for the proletariat and the people, the one is the same as the other.' See Vicente Lombardo Toledano, 'Apagar el incendio de la guerra: Tarea del proletariado' [Nov. 1939]; and Vicente Lombardo Toledano, 'Los trabajadores están en pie de lucha para defender a toda costa la independencia de América Latina' [Jan. 1940], and especially Vicente Lombardo Toledano, 'Informe del comité nacional de la CTM, al XIII consejo nacional de la misma institución' [April 1940], in V. Lombardo Toledano, *Obras completas*, 25 vols. (México, DF, 1991), Vol. 22, pp. 274ff., Vol. 23, pp. 89ff., and Vol. 24, pp. 13ff. Lombardo Toledano changed his tune rather dramatically once Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet Union.

Martillo, described him as a traitor: 'in the face of the palpitating problem of the imperialist war, to cite only one case, he does not vacillate in putting himself behind the interests of the Yankee bankers, and with unhidden preoccupation he calls for support of the democratic policy of the Roosevelts and Rockefellers.' Having returned to Venezuela in February 1941, Betancourt had already indicated where he stood in an interview with *Ahora*: 'I reject the Communist Party, with all the force of my Venezuelan intransigence, because its dependence on Moscow converts it into a simple bureaucratic appendage of the Soviet state.'⁷³

Even before the somewhat byzantine Venezuelan elections of 1941 – whose result was a foregone conclusion – Isaías Medina had promised that he would legalise opposition political parties. In deciding to run the well-known novelist Rómulo Gallegos against Medina, Betancourt and his allies undoubtedly thought that the opportunity to organise was worth whatever legitimacy their participation might confer upon the elections. The political party which they established, *Acción Democrática*, was very much in Apra's mould: a multiclass party committed to a programme of social democratic reform and the pursuit of mutually beneficial relations with the United States. Once legalised, it steadily gathered strength over the next few years as it established its own newspaper, *El País*, and wrested control of most of the growing Venezuelan labour movement from the communists.⁷⁴

The US reaction to Betancourt

The key figures in the US embassy in Venezuela would initially run hot and cold in their attitudes toward Betancourt after the coup which brought him to power on 18 October 1945. For much of 1946, they were uncertain if they had been correct in their judgement that he was genuinely committed to political democracy and to a cooperative relationship with the United States. They had, however, been predisposed to like him. Both the ambassador and the consul of embassy were old friends of Braden's and they shared with him a belief that all US basic interests in Latin America would be advanced by the triumph of reformist and democratic forces in the region and a conviction that US policy could be of direct assistance. As early as October 1943, the embassy had described *Acción Democrática* as just such a force; as a party which 'demands the establishment of the basic requirements of democracy such as free and direct elections and education for the masses, economic and agrarian reform to the end that the farmer may own his land and thereby

⁷³ Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 151–63, quotations 162–3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–92.

achieve for the country an improvement in agricultural production, and economic nationalism to the end that the nation may secure a more effective control over her natural resources.⁷⁵ As early as January 1944, the embassy had offered an assessment of Betancourt which was remarkable for its accuracy:

He is the real political power in the leftist opposition political party 'Acción Democrática' and could be called 'National Chairman' of the Party. While his views are inclined to the left, he is not a Communist, although he is frequently accused of being one and it is understood that at one time he was a member of the Communist Party in Costa Rica. Due to his strong agitation for political and economic reform under the regime of López Contreras, he was branded as a Communist and expelled from Venezuela. However, he fights the Communists at every opportunity and, in addition, is bitterly anti-López Contreras. He is well-informed, aggressive, and a good speaker. He was one of the leaders of the fight to bring about revision of Venezuelan oil legislation and often speaks out concerning United States oil interests in Venezuela. Although violently critical of United States influence as it manifests itself in Venezuela, he is believed to be more nationalistic than anti-United States. He now writes a daily column for the 'Acción Democrática'-inspired 'El País'. He is a stubborn individualist and is a political force to be reckoned with.⁷⁶

Frank Corrigan, the US ambassador to Caracas, had already been in the country for six years when Betancourt came to power and was intimately familiar with Venezuelan politics. A political appointee, he had an unusual background, having worked as a surgeon in a hospital in Chile from 1917 to 1919, and for many years in Cleveland, before becoming minister to El Salvador in 1934.⁷⁷ It was during his time in Chile that he and Braden had become friends.⁷⁸ As minister to El Salvador, he had urged a policy similar to the one which Braden would advance in 1945 and seek to implement as ambassador to Argentina and as assistant secretary. Writing to the State Department on 21 January 1936, Corrigan suggested that dictatorially inclined leaders in the region were threatening to treat US self-restraint as an excuse to do what they wished while claiming Washington's blessing. Given the bad feeling against the United States, on account of its previous interventions, it had been natural to emphasise

⁷⁵ Report #26, Consulate, Caracas, 19 Oct. 1943, quoted in Roland Hussey, 'Background Material on Acción Democrática in Connection with the Venezuelan Revolution', 24 Oct. 1945, Memos of the American Republics Division of Research and Liaison, Box 16, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, NA.

⁷⁶ Confidential Biographic Data, Jan. 1944, quoted in Roland Hussey, 'Background Material', 24 Oct. 1945, Memos of the American Republics Division of Research and Liaison, Box 16, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, NA.

⁷⁷ S. G. Rabe, *The Road to OPEC: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1919-1976* (Austin, 1982), pp. 73-4.

⁷⁸ Spruille Braden to Frank Corrigan, 13 Jan. 1939, 'Braden, Spruille', Box 1, Francis P. Corrigan Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

the purely negative aspects of the Good Neighbour Policy – the commitment of self-restraint and non-intervention – but there had to be positive aspects to that policy as well:

Failure of a Mission to use its influence constructively may become a sin of omission with consequences fully as grievous as the former sins of commission. It would be useful to know the Department's point of view as to possible preventive steps which might be taken in advance of the rapidly developing situation alluded to in the earlier part of this despatch. Liberal elements, some of which have been formerly active critics of the United States and bitter opponents of intervention, have indicated to me that the cooperation (by diplomatic means) of the United States is more than welcome when it seeks to retain progress and prevent bloodshed and the establishment of autocratic régimes and actual setting up to dictatorships such as the Machado régime in Cuba and the Gómez dictatorship in Venezuela. They feel that a Liberal Government like that of the United States with its immense power and moral influence should lend its aid and cooperation in every peaceful way to retain progress and ideals and to aid the evolution of these countries toward real democratic republican government such as at present exists in Costa Rica.⁷⁹

Corrigan's position won some initial support from Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles before Laurence Duggan, the chief of the Division of Latin American Affairs, talked him out of it.⁸⁰ Such politically uncertain situations were often so delicate and complex, Duggan argued, that deliberate inaction would be better than action the precise consequences of which could not be foreseen. 'On more than occasion inept handling of these situations by our own representatives has not only served to make these situations worse but has resulted in embarrassment for and intense criticism of the United States.'⁸¹ Defeated within the State Department in 1936, Corrigan would maintain his outlook and would act upon it in Venezuela.

Although an advocate of democratic solidarity, Corrigan was not a wild enthusiast for the promotion of democracy abroad. In the summer of 1945, he lent a copy of a cautionary article on the subject to his more optimistic consul of embassy, Allan Dawson. Dawson had been Braden's assistant in the negotiations to end the Chaco War and he was a staunch supporter of his policy.⁸² The cautionary article was by A. G. Keller, an

⁷⁹ Frank Corrigan to Cordell Hull, 21 Jan. 1936, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [Hereafter FRUS], 1936, Vol. 5, pp. 126–7.

⁸⁰ Sumner Welles to Laurence Duggan, 17 March 1936; Laurence Duggan to Sumner Welles, 25 March 1936; Sumner Welles to Laurence Duggan, 26 March 1936; FRUS, 1936, Vol. 5, pp. 127–31.

⁸¹ Laurence Duggan to Sumner Welles, 25 March 1936, FRUS, 1936, Vol. 5, p. 130.

⁸² 'I want you to know just how pleased and satisfied I was at your appointment to direct and formulate our Latin American policy. I can think of nothing that has ever made me happier. This is not only because you are patently the best fitted citizen for the long overdue job of revamping that policy and getting it back on the track but because your

emeritus professor of sociology at Yale.⁸³ Keller maintained that those who urged a programme of world-democratisation were following a faith near enough to religion to allow of comparison. It was not a programme likely to succeed, at least not anytime soon. The transplantation of democracy would require the right kind of cultural soil and this was simply not likely to be found in many countries. The effort to establish a republic in Germany, for example, appeared to have been almost as incomprehensible to the national *Weltanschauung* as a comparable effort in Japan. Political systems were a 'natural growth' which required the right nutritive deposits accumulated in folkways over historic periods. No hothouse efforts could adjust for unfavourable soil. By all means, Keller concluded, let us have all the democracy possible and attempt to encourage it wherever it has a chance to grow. 'But let us consider the several kinds of ground mentioned in the Parable of the Sower, and not bank heavily upon the thin and stony soil, even if out of it certain showy sprouts spring up forthwith; for, later on, their withering away or their grotesque parody of genuine blossoming may have to be embarrassingly explained.'⁸⁴

After reading the piece, Dawson told Corrigan that he had found it interesting, and that he considered Keller a worthy successor to William Graham Sumner, but that he was a convinced democrat, not a sociologist:

In other words, I am under the handicap, in this particular, of being a fellow who has a religion instead of looking at matters from the objective point of view of one who dissects religion. I agree thoroughly that democracy cannot be imposed but has to be a growth from within. However, elements of democracy exist in practically every community and culture. It seems to me that the cue of those of us who believe that democracy is the ideal way of life which evolution will eventually bring to all, even if it may be long-delayed, is to do what we can to nurture these feeble sprouts by example and encouragement. Certainly, the totalitarian ideologies, both right and left, use proselytizing and conquest as weapons. While I do not advocate following their methods, we should at least defend what we believe to the extent of giving it a chance to develop naturally, and not leaving the field to democracy's ruthless opponents.⁸⁵

Whether there was any great difference between Dawson's and Corrigan's outlook is doubtful. In the diplomatic record they appear to be largely in agreement. Contemporary opinion, however, did detect a

integrity, vigor and sound belief in democracy are so needed in the Washington councils.' Allan Dawson to Spruille Braden, 1 Sept. 1945, 'Diplomatic Correspondence: 1946-7, A-D', Box 20, Braden Papers.

⁸³ A. G. Keller, 'The Transplantation of Democracy', *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (March 1945), pp. 165-76.

⁸⁴ Keller, *ibid.*, p. 175.

⁸⁵ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 4 Sept. 1945, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

difference. The Venezuelan military, in particular, as Dawson told Corrigan in October 1946, 'consider me a buddy of the Acción Democrátistas while you are supposed by them to be more conservative'.⁸⁶ This was not without some foundation. Three days before the coup, finding out that Betancourt was broke, Dawson had even lent him twenty *bolívares* or about six dollars.⁸⁷

While the US embassy had excellent contacts, and even heard a few rumours that something was going to happen, the events of 18 October 1945 still came as a surprise.⁸⁸ Explaining the underlying reason for the coup in a letter to his son, Corrigan indicated that it had turned on the question of who would succeed Isaías Medina as the governing party's candidate for the upcoming elections:

Politically the thing began with the nervous breakdown of Escalante who probably would have won with the Government's backing. His departure for a sanatorium on an Army plane left the Government without a candidate. Then Medina's P.D.V. party held a convention which was pure rubber stamp and put up a non-entity, Biaggini, whom everybody recognized as a puppet of Medina. Foreseeing the renewal of a Gómez type dictatorship with Medina playing the part of Gómez, set up a wave of revolution throughout the country.⁸⁹

While this account ignored certain issues, it was basically correct. Angel Biaggini, the minister of agriculture, had virtually no constituency of his own whereas Diógenes Escalante, the Venezuelan ambassador in Washington, had been widely acceptable, even to the *adecos*. Beyond this, there had been a concern among both the *adecos* and elements in the military that López Contreras might attempt a return to power and there was also considerable resentment among the junior officers over issues of pay and promotions. Even at the price of cooperating with such officers – who might have taken action without them – the *adecos* were undoubtedly drawn by the opportunity to begin to put their ideals into practice and to move Venezuela toward social reform and genuine elections with widespread suffrage.⁹⁰

The US reaction to the coup was generally sympathetic. Meeting with the Colombian ambassador to Washington, on 25 October 1945, Braden quickly ascertained that they were in agreement as to the previous week's developments in Venezuela: that 'the Junta was in control of the country;

⁸⁶ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 9 Oct. 1946, *ibid*.

⁸⁷ While denying that there was any foundation to communist charges of US support for the coup, Corrigan did mention Dawson's loan in passing. Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, 1 July 1946, 810.00B/7-146, NA.

⁸⁸ Frank Corrigan to Joe Flack, 22 Oct. 1945, 'Flack, Joe', Box 2, Corrigan Papers. Flack was the head of the North and West Coast Division of the State Department at this time.

⁸⁹ Frank Corrigan to Kevin Corrigan, 27 Oct. 1945, '1945', Box 12, Corrigan Papers.

⁹⁰ Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 195–220.

that the revolution had been free from any foreign influence; that the Junta had expressed its intention to comply with all international agreements previously entered into by the Venezuelan Government; and that it appeared to be democratic in its orientation'.⁹¹ Later in the day, Braden spoke with the Cuban, Brazilian and Bolivian ambassadors, and the Argentine chargé. He indicated that the United States was favourably impressed and disposed to accord recognition after consultation with the other American republics.⁹²

The honeymoon between the Venezuelan junta and the US embassy was relatively brief. On 31 December 1945, the junta issued Decree 112 placing a retroactive tax on income over 800,000 *bolívars* which had been earned during the year. More than 98 per cent of this tax – which gave the junta an additional \$26.5 million (Bs. 89 million) – was paid by the oil companies.⁹³ As this affected US taxes, it also took about \$3 million out of the United States Treasury.⁹⁴ The sums of money involved were not so great as to alienate either the larger oil companies or the embassy. In the face of wartime and postwar petroleum shortages oil prices were rising rapidly and even after it paid an extra \$18 million under the decree, Creole Petroleum still earned over \$90 million in Venezuela in 1945.⁹⁵ On the other hand, the suggestion that this decree was not considered a problem because it merely reflected an attempt to insure a fifty-fifty profit split agreed to in 1943 is clearly mistaken on many levels.⁹⁶ The unilateral character of the decree, and the prospect that future relations would follow a similar pattern, contributed to serious concern within the US

⁹¹ Bainbridge Davis, Memorandum of Conversation between Spruille Braden and Carlos Sanz de Santamaria, 25 Oct. 1945, 831.01/10-2545, NA.

⁹² Spruille Braden, memorandum, *ibid.*

⁹³ Rabe, *The Road to OPEC*, p. 102; Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 259.

⁹⁴ Frank Corrigan to Alan Dawson, 15 Feb. 1946, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

⁹⁵ Rabe, *The Road to OPEC*, p. 102.

⁹⁶ Stephen Rabe has suggested that the larger oil companies protested only mildly because they were prospering and recognised that the 1943 oil legislation was designed to divide profits equally between themselves and the Venezuelan government and that Decree 112 insured such a division for 1945. See Rabe, *The Road to OPEC*, pp. 102–3. In fact, as Bernard Mommer has shown, a 50:50 profit split was not adopted in 1943, but only an agreement which centered on royalties. The *adecos* did express the hope that this agreement, together with other taxes, would result in a 60:40 profit split between Venezuela and the oil companies. Venezuela had, however, no legal commitment from the companies to such an arrangement or even to a 50:50 split. There was merely an expectation on the part of the *adecos* that the 1943 agreement would, over the years, result in a 50:50 split. This had no practical implication for the division of any given year's profits. See B. Mommer, *La cuestión petrolera* (Caracas, 1988), especially pp. 84–96. I am particularly grateful to anonymous referees from the *Journal of Latin American Studies* for calling my attention to this fine work and for other helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.

embassy. Dawson went so far as to describe it as part of a 'demagogic and radical' path that Betancourt had chosen to adopt.⁹⁷

Corrigan saw himself and his embassy, with some reason, as a progressive force on the oil question that had been promoting Venezuelan as well as US interests. Within a month of arriving in Caracas, in 1939, he was arguing that the oil companies were obliged by their position in Venezuelan society to contribute to the amelioration of social conditions in the country and to help the Venezuelan government in reformist projects such as the construction of homes, schools, hospitals and roads.⁹⁸ For the next few years – against the background of expropriations in Mexico and Bolivia and the wartime need for Venezuelan oil – he was involved in efforts to reach an understanding between the oil companies and the government of Venezuela which would be more favourable to the Venezuelans than those which had been reached under Gómez. Such an understanding would be seen as more legitimate in Venezuela and therefore would be more durable. This process of negotiations culminated in the revision of Venezuela's oil legislation in 1943. 'I can honestly say', Corrigan boasted in a contemporary memo, 'that but for our unpublicised efforts the happy result would not have been attained.'⁹⁹

Under the 1943 legislation, as Bryce Wood has observed, existing concessions were reaffirmed with the following changes: '(1) an increase in royalties to the government from rates varying between $7\frac{1}{2}$ and 11 per cent to a uniform rate of $16\frac{2}{3}$ per cent; (2) the establishment of a new base on which the royalties were calculated which was more favourable to the government than the one used previously; (3) a reduction in the customs exemptions formerly enjoyed by the companies.'¹⁰⁰ William F. Buckley, the general agent for Pantepec, one of the smaller oil companies, would later go so far as to claim that the Venezuelan government had been willing to settle for a one-eighth royalty and that it was the State Department's representative in the negotiations who had proposed that the royalty be made one-sixth.¹⁰¹ In any case, Corrigan assumed that the United States government, the Venezuelan government, and the oil companies, had all come to a mutual understanding which would advance their common interests and that negotiation was the proper mechanism for reaching such understandings. Decree 112 suggested that the

⁹⁷ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 12 Jan. 1946, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

⁹⁸ Corrigan to State Department, 9 Oct. 1939, 831.6363/1155, quoted in Rabe, *The Road to OPEC*, p. 73.

⁹⁹ Frank Corrigan, memorandum, 11 May 1943, 'State Department', Box 19, Corrigan Papers.

¹⁰⁰ B. Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York, 1961), p. 276.

¹⁰¹ William F. Buckley to James Byrnes, 29 Oct. 1945, 831.01/10-2945, NA.

Venezuelan Junta might have other ideas about its interests and the means by which they could be advanced.

Betancourt's New Year's Day address raised further questions for the US embassy which described it as disappointingly vague, primarily because of its failure to set a date for the promised elections, but also in its economic proposals.¹⁰² Betancourt spoke of the need to rescue the majority of Venezuelans from backwardness and misery and promised that the economic programme of the Junta would free Venezuela from foreign tutelage in many respects. The Institute for the Increase of Production, which was to be financed by Decree 112, would provide long-term credit, machinery and technical assistance to both industry and agriculture in an effort to reconstruct the Venezuelan economy. Public housing would be built in urban areas and agrarian reform would provide land to landless agriculturists by utilising the properties acquired from those found guilty of corruption by the Tribunal of Civic and Administrative Responsibility as well as the lands which had belonged to Gómez. Venezuelan commerce would be imported and exported in a national merchant marine.¹⁰³

Commenting on Betancourt's speech, Dawson suggested that it bore the marks of having been drafted by a committee and not carefully thought out:

While the objectives announced are excellent, hardly a start can be made on them during the next few months. Offhand, it would appear to an independent observer that they would more properly be the object of a long-term program to be put into effect by a permanent, constitutional administration after thorough study and that there are many short-term measures, neglected in the program, which might better lead to meeting the unquestioned need for improved living conditions and lowering the cost of living in Venezuela... That the program was not prepared as soundly as would have been advisable is shown by the stress laid on the development of a national merchant marine as one of the basic objectives. Actually, the high freight rates on imported merchandise are but a relatively small factor in the inordinately high cost of imported goods, much more important being the heavy Venezuelan import duties and the tremendous profit taken by middlemen. The Junta has as yet taken no effective measures on either score.¹⁰⁴

Another issue which contributed to increasing tension between the Junta and the embassy had to do with the contracts of a US-owned firm, Constructing Engineers, CA. In early February 1946, Dawson told Corrigan that a government official, Luís Lander, had summarily informed this company that all of its contracts were cancelled on account of a 'lack of confidence'.

¹⁰² Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 3 Jan. 1946, 831.00/1-346, NA.

¹⁰³ Rómulo Betancourt, 'Mensaje de Año Nuevo dirigido por radio a la Nación', 1 Jan. 1946, in Betancourt, *Trayectoria democrática de una revolución*, Vol. 2, pp. 61-6.

¹⁰⁴ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 3 Jan. 1946, 831.00/1-346, NA.

Parsons, Brinkerhoff, etc., the Constructing Engineers' parent company, is one of the top two or three engineering firms in the States, it employs a larger percentage of Venezuelans in responsible jobs than any other foreign company in the country and without any differential in salaries, and it has charged a substantially smaller percentage on its work than is customary in its field. This all adds up to the fact that Lander is trying to make political capital by an anti-gringo blow before taking up his job as Secretary General of A.D. It is a stinking mess.¹⁰⁵

At least as troubling to the embassy as the economic issues, even given the security implications attached to Venezuelan oil, were the antidemocratic tendencies which the Junta appeared to demonstrate in its first months in power. To the continuing delay in announcing a definite date for elections, and the similar delay in announcing the restoration of constitutional guarantees – suspended by the Medina regime as one of its last acts – the Junta added a series of arrests of political opponents including, most notably, Antonio A. Pulido Villafañe, the chief justice of the Supreme Court.¹⁰⁶ Although the Junta claimed to be acting in self-defence, after having uncovered a counter-revolutionary plot, Dawson saw it as taking action against a man who might become the focus of opposition although he had done nothing subversive. 'The Pulido "plot" was pure eyewash, as Morales has admitted to me', he told Corrigan.¹⁰⁷

When the draft Electoral Statute came out on 5 February 1946, Dawson did acknowledge that the *adeco* in charge of the project, Andrés Eloy Blanco, had done a good job.¹⁰⁸ The favourable impact which it might have had on public opinion he thought had been largely counteracted by a speech on the same day by Interior Minister Valmore Rodríguez. Aside from allowing indoor political meetings in theatres and the like, this speech essentially reaffirmed the suspension of constitutional guarantees and the Junta's promise 'not to permit defence of the overthrown regimes'. Since practically any criticism of the Junta had been considered as falling into this category in the past, Dawson noted, this meant that there would be no lessening of the informal, but effective, controls on the press. In his report to the State Department he quoted Valmore Rodríguez's reply to a journalist when asked if the *Partido Democrático Venezolano* (PDV) – the party of the Medina regime – would enjoy the same political liberties as those granted to other political organisations: 'Is there any PDV? I have heard that that party retired from the public stage

¹⁰⁵ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 5 Feb. 1946, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

¹⁰⁶ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 15 Jan. 1946, 831.00/1-1546, NA.

¹⁰⁷ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 16 Jan. 1946; see also Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 19 Jan. 1946, both in 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers. The admission probably came from Carlos Morales, the Foreign Minister.

¹⁰⁸ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 15 Feb. 1946, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

together with its leader and its principal supporters. In any event, could that party do anything else, if it has not perished, than work for the resurrection of the old Medina regime?'¹⁰⁹

By March 1946, Corrigan could comment that Betancourt 'now seems a very different person from the modest, straight-thinking man who came into office last October'. He might say that it would be his greatest pride to turn over power to whomever the people elected, friend or foe, but if opposition leaders were deported or imprisoned, and the organisation and functioning of opposition parties was made difficult, what were the chances of a foe being elected?

Certainly, many persons have been arrested in Venezuela under the Junta regime with no charges against them ever made public and many of those detained for alleged 'conspiracy' seem actually to have been merely persons who were too vigorous in their oral opposition to the Junta and might become dangerous. However bad the Medina regime was, and the graft, corruption, and rigging of elections under it did reach to inexcusable extremes, it held not a single political prisoner when it was overthrown, a record which the Junta cannot begin to rival. That Sr Betancourt has difficulty in taking a soundly democratic position to opposition is indicated by his stricture concerning the campaign against the Jury of Civil and Administrative Responsibility which 'has now dared to raise its head in the pages of the daily press'. His statement that 'perhaps this Tribunal has made some mistakes; but the Revolutionary Government will see to it that the decisions of the Tribunal are complied with' also has a strangely undemocratic ring.¹¹⁰

Although he does not appear to have raised the idea with the State Department, as early as 14 February 1946, Corrigan had decided that the embassy would have to use its influence at some point in an effort to improve the situation. He suggested that Dawson consider meeting with Betancourt and the other key members of the Junta and explaining to them the United States' desire for a genuinely cooperative relationship with Venezuela, its interests in the country, and its concern that those interests had been adversely affected in recent months. The justification for such a course of action Corrigan thought was clear enough:

In the first place, we were their friends when they needed a friend very badly. We have tried to be in every way a good neighbor to Venezuela. We have spent some millions of dollars as a contribution to their health and welfare. We have furnished them any kind of expert they wanted, upon demand. Certainly what we have done has resulted in their having received an excellent press, early recognition of the present government, and an inspiration of confidence in it. The net results of their government so far, not speaking of the blood that was spilt in the revolution, is that conditions are certainly no better for the people of Venezuela, and much worse for our own interests; our interests both in

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 5 Feb. 1946, 831.00/2-546, NA.

¹¹⁰ Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, 12 March 1946, 831.00/3-1246, MA

democracy and its progress, and our material interests as represented by American investments and activities in Venezuela... Now, they want a lot of things, and they are going to need a lot of things, and without our friendship and good will their future, to say the least, is dubious. So, there has to be a showdown. Are they our friends, and do they want to play ball with us and have the kind of sincere friendship and cooperation that we are ready to give them, or are they not?¹¹¹

In a follow-up letter the next day, Corrigan softened his tone somewhat before continuing in the same vein. Noting that he had once sought to encourage an utterly downcast Andrés Eloy Blanco about *Acción Democrática's* prospects, Corrigan suggested that he be included in the meeting. In the discussion, Dawson might remind the *adecos* of the utter failure of the British Labour Party the first time it took power: 'There is a lesson in that for them if they will heed it.' That a huge howl had not yet gone up from the hundreds of thousands of stockholders that companies like Creole had in the United States was a near miracle for which the embassy could take some credit. If such a howl was to start, they would be in real trouble as Venezuela's oil position was already extremely vulnerable internationally. 'What they are doing is stupid and criminal in the light of the real interests of their country. Ignorance and stupidity can cause losses that will make the amounts taken in graft and speculation look like small change in comparison.'¹¹²

When the 'showdown' finally came, on 30 April 1946, it would be between Corrigan and Betancourt during a three-hour private dinner at the Miraflores Palace followed by coffee, liqueur and Havana cigars.¹¹³ In addition to his offer of US friendship in general, Corrigan brought to the table the authority to release surplus military airplanes for delivery to Venezuela that he knew the Venezuelan military wanted. The Venezuelan air attaché in Washington had already informed Betancourt, on the basis of his contacts in the War Department, that delivery was being blocked by the State Department. Betancourt, in turn, had already indicated to Dawson that he knew that this was the case.¹¹⁴

After expressing his appreciation for US assistance to Venezuela's

¹¹¹ Frank Corrigan to Alan Dawson, 14 Feb. 1946, 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

¹¹² Frank Corrigan to Alan Dawson, 15 Feb. 1946, *ibid.* In a letter in this file from 28 Jan. 1946, Dawson had suggested to Corrigan that members of the Junta went off on an anti-foreign capital bent when they wanted to impress the public, but that he and other members of the embassy had been working diligently 'to make them realize what harm lack of confidence up North might mean'.

¹¹³ Frank Corrigan to Arthur Proudfit, 1 May 1946, 'Proudfit, Arthur', Box 8, Corrigan Papers.

¹¹⁴ Bainbridge Davis, memorandum, 12 April 1946, 'Diplomatic Correspondence: 1946-7, A-D', Box 20, Braden Papers. Commenting on the War Department's leak in a marginal note, Braden wrote: 'This is getting to be the standard practice.'

health and sanitation programme, Betancourt turned to the question of supplies in general – under what remained of Washington's wartime regulations – and suggested that Venezuela had not been treated favourably. Corrigan, having anticipated the complaint, presented him with a detailed memorandum suggesting that Venezuela had in fact received preferential treatment, relative both to US and European consumers, in various categories of foodstuffs, agricultural machinery, and automotive vehicles. Betancourt next turned to the issue of the military mission and the planes which the Venezuelan military desired. Assuming that Betancourt's prestige with the military would depend to a considerable extent on a favourable answer, Corrigan wanted to obtain certain assurances before providing it:

I, therefore, said to him, 'I would like to discuss with you the basic issues in which we are interested. They are two in number: (1) The orientation of your government and the opinions of its members with regard to our own devotion and commitments towards the ideals of democracy and the preservation and development of democratic processes, and (2) The protection of our material interests which are in large part important not only economically but also strategically for ourselves and from the standpoint of continental security.' He gave me categorical assurances on both points using the word '*categoricamente*' in assuring me each time.¹¹⁵

Betancourt stressed the democratic character of his administration, noting that López Contreras' recent denunciation of it as a dictatorship had been published in all the Caracas papers. He said that he had been deeply moved by a recent newsreel showing commemorative ceremonies on the first anniversary of Roosevelt's death. He had lived all his life as a poor man, and expected to die as such, and it was his only ambition to be mourned as Roosevelt was mourned. His administration was now buying desks and benches so that schoolchildren would have a place to sit in the buildings which his predecessors had built. A greatly increased number of school lunches were now being served across the nation. Conceding that Betancourt made a good case for the social good intentions of his administration, Corrigan turned to the issue of political prisoners and asked how many remained in Venezuelan jails. He was surprised to learn that there were only five left, that Pulido was now in Cuba, and that his family and the families of all the exiled generals were receiving an allowance from the government or their regular pensions. Defending the delay in the elections, Betancourt noted that his party could easily have taken advantage of its organisational strength to win early elections, but that it wanted to ensure a fair contest by giving opposition

¹¹⁵ Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, 2 May 1946, 831.00/5-246, NA. See also the attached memorandum on 'The Venezuelan Supply Situation'.

parties an opportunity to organise. The *adecos*' ability to have won an early election Corrigan acknowledged.¹¹⁶

Conceding the sincerity of Betancourt's devotion to democracy, Corrigan turned to the question of material interests. 'In his answer to this', Corrigan later told the president of Creole Petroleum, 'he mentioned your name and told me that Mr Proudfit, with whom he had recently discussed the subject at length, was thoroughly familiar with his feelings and knew that he considered that the Venezuelan Government and the oil companies were partners (*socios*) and that their interests in economic exploitation of the country's petroleum under conditions which would enable Venezuela to compete in world markets were identical.'¹¹⁷ Beyond this, Betancourt indicated that he had no desire to see the oil workers establish themselves as a 'labor aristocracy' and that his government would protect the oil companies from unreasonable labour demands. Having been satisfied as to both material and ideal interests, Corrigan informed Betancourt that he could take credit with the military members of the Junta for obtaining the military planes.¹¹⁸

While there would be future occasions for complaint, US attitudes toward Betancourt and Acción Democrática improved steadily as it became increasingly apparent that Betancourt was in fact not only sincere in his convictions, but was also capable of pursuing his aims skilfully and with popular support. The first hard evidence for this came in the fall of 1946 with the election of a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution. Several political parties had emerged by this time: the Partido Social Cristiano (Copei), an essentially Christian democratic party whose leading figure was Rafael Caldera; the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD), a leftist and more personalist party centered on Jóvito Villalba; the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) led by Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, and the Partido Revolucionario Proletario (PRP), a communist splinter faction which ran a joint ticket with the PCV but which was much more vocally hostile to the Junta.¹¹⁹

On 27 October 1946, in contrast with the five per cent of the population who had voted in previous elections, more than a third of the Venezuelan people went to the polls. The URD and the communists each garnered around 50,000 votes and each gained two members for their parties in the assembly. Copei elected 19 assembly members with a little less than 190,000 votes. AD, with well over a million votes, elected 137 members

¹¹⁶ Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Frank Corrigan to Arthur Proudfit, 1 May 1946, 'Proudfit, Arthur', Box 8, Corrigan Papers.

¹¹⁸ Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, 2 May 1946, 831.00/5-246, NA.

¹¹⁹ For background on these parties, see Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, pp. 229-34.

of the assembly.¹²⁰ While the opposition parties accused the *adecos* of employing unfair tactics during the campaign, none of them raised charges of electoral fraud.¹²¹ The ballot was secret, Corrigan informed the State Department, and the election was carried out with relative liberty and correctness on the part of the supervising electoral boards.¹²² In a private letter to Braden, Dawson commented on the election's political impact:

The election results here surprised all of us by the overwhelming majority Acción Democrática received although it was quite clear in advance that it would get a majority, not just a plurality. The poor showing of URD and the Communists just goes to show that, as Haya de la Torre said, a well-organized left-wing party with popular bases in this section of South America leaves little for the international Marxists or other left-of-center groups to work on. Copei will furnish at least a vocal opposition on the Conservative side and the country is in no danger from reactionary elements as long as reasonable young Caldera is the conservative leader. So far as I can see, Acción Democrática's tremendous majority ensures peace and quiet in Venezuela for some time.¹²³

None of us realised a year ago how much executive ability Betancourt had in him, Corrigan reported to the State Department after the elections. Yet his overall assessment was much less sanguine than Dawson's. In large part, this was because he concentrated on the impact of the elections on the Venezuelan military. Most of the military leadership, he noted, came from the Andean state of Táchira where the victory went to Copei.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹²¹ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 6 Nov. 1946, 831.00/11-646, NA. Some of the complaints against AD's tactics were undoubtedly justified, but it seems impossible to get at the truth of some of the more important ones. Before a Copei mass meeting on 18 June 1946, for example, handbills were distributed in Caracas threatening that AD would disrupt the meeting. According to Robert Alexander, who was basing his account on an interview with Rafael Caldera, 'Neither Gonzalo Barrios as governor of the Federal District nor Mario Vargas as minister of the interior responded favorably to Copei requests for police protection for the meeting. The threatened attack did take place, and three people were killed during it'. Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 250. On 20 Oct. 1946, in contrast, Copei held a large mass meeting in Caracas without the slightest untoward event. Gonzalo Barrios, Dawson reported to the State Department, 'informed me before the meeting that he was morally certain that there would be no incidents. He said he had suggested to the copei leaders that the meeting be held in the afternoon instead of at night in order to make protection easier, had made arrangements for half of the Caracas police force plus army detachments to be on hand and had called the principal Communist leaders (the Communists were blamed, probably with reason, for the June 18 fracas) into his office on Oct. 19 to tell them that he would hold them personally responsible and jail them if there were any disorder'. Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 21 Oct. 1946, 831.00/10-2146, NA.

¹²² Frank Corrigan, 'Comments on Recent Revolution in Venezuela', 13 Dec. 1946, FW831.00/11-1346, NA.

¹²³ Allan Dawson to Spruille Braden, 30 Oct. 1946, 'Diplomatic Correspondence: 1946-7, A-D', Box 20, Braden Papers.

They were astonished at the way the vote had gone nationally and were afraid that they had created a Frankenstein. For a year they had believed that they had put Rómulo in and could throw him out. Now, with AD's overwhelming victory at the polls, they were not at all confident that even all of the Army would follow them in an attempt to override the expressed will of the people. They feared and resented their loss of influence and this, combined with AD's mistakes, created tension and instability.¹²⁴

Betancourt, Corrigan maintained, 'might have become a great national leader'. Instead, having given in to petty demagoguery, and a needless vindictiveness best exemplified in his treatment of López Contreras, he had become the leader of a sector rather than the nation.¹²⁵ Over the course of November 1946, as the embassy heard rumours of coups being plotted, Corrigan became increasingly worried. He invited Betancourt to an informal luncheon to discuss the danger. Betancourt told him that the government was aware of everything that was going on and assured him that there was no reason for concern. The government would have no difficulty in maintaining control and he was in fact going to the country to work on his message to the Constitutional Convention. This assessment was proved to be correct when all that materialised was a local revolt on 11 December 1946 which was quickly put down. Still, Corrigan told the State Department, the judgement of the Tribunal of Civil and Administrative Responsibility had left such strong resentments behind that they constituted a fertile field for the growth of a counter-revolutionary movement.¹²⁶ Were López Contreras to lead such a

¹²⁴ Frank Corrigan to James Byrnes, 7 Nov. 1946, 831.00/11-746, NA.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* Both Dawson and Corrigan were favourably inclined toward López Contreras for what they considered as his role in leading Venezuela away from the Gómez dictatorship. In early 1946, Corrigan had met with him and ascertained that he had completely separated himself from the Medina crowd and was willing to help Betancourt carry out a programme which he considered similar to his own. Corrigan suggested that Dawson pass this information along to Betancourt and received this reply: 'I finally had a chance to talk to Rómulo about General L. C. He has become more bitter against the old man with the passage of time and, from his remarks, it was clear that he would not consider letting him come back as long as he is in power. In an endeavor to find an excuse for continuing the present repressive police system and detentions without formal charges, he and Rodríguez and the Junta as a whole are getting themselves in deeper and deeper with verbal attacks on "reactionary forces" and "the deposed regimes" (always with an "s"). Having created this bugaboo, they cannot well go back on their line and they are a vindictive crowd. I think I wrote you some time ago that Valmore had told me with glee that the Sustanciadora had uncovered some hidden assets of L. C.' Frank Corrigan to Allan Dawson, 2 Jan. 1946; and Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 5 Feb. 1946, both in 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

¹²⁶ 'By taking away not only ill-gotten wealth from former office holders and their sycophants, but legitimately acquired property as well, such an amount of hatred has been engendered that some of those affected have been driven to plotting against the

movement – in response to the attempt to smear his name and impoverish him – he would have a solid block of Andean support. This was the last serious obstacle which remained to the success of the October Revolution. It would have to be dealt with, either by diplomatic means or civil war, before the Venezuelan political situation could be called stable.¹²⁷

By March 1947, Corrigan could inform the State Department that the past fifteen months had been a period of great development for Betancourt whose courage and initiative, 'have caused me to marvel'. Like Assistant Secretary of State Braden, Corrigan commented, Betancourt was convinced that communism could not be successfully combated by reactionaries and that 'it must be the task of the liberal-thinking people of the world to defeat Communism'. In the event of any trouble with the Soviet Union, Betancourt had assured him, the Venezuelan government would be with the United States 100 per cent. Its first action in such a case would be to imprison all the active communists in the country as the fifth columnists they were.¹²⁸ In a newspaper interview, Betancourt stressed his agreement with Truman's argument – in the speech enunciating the Truman Doctrine – that hunger, misery and unemployment were the ingredients which gave rise to extremist ideologies. The weakness of the communists in Venezuela, he suggested, was because the Venezuelan people were strongly nationalistic and because the present government had shown a disposition to address the problems of the masses, to satisfy their needs and raise their living standards.¹²⁹

Corrigan agreed that communism was weak in Venezuela and declining in strength. The reds had taken a big tumble during the past year, he declared in a Miami newspaper interview in May 1947, and had 'reached the stage where they are just noisy'.¹³⁰ That the *adecos* were in a particularly

Government. And, to the number of people who still have appreciable influence despite the fact that much if not all of their wealth has been taken from them, there must be added a very large number of other people who were deprived of their liberty and even subjected to torture for reasons probably more closely related to political vindictiveness than to any sound evidence of connection with conspiracy'. Frank Corrigan to George Marshall, 22 Jan. 1947, 831.00/1-2247, NA.

¹²⁷ Frank Corrigan, 'Comments on Recent Revolution in Venezuela', 13 Dec. 1946, FW831.00/11-1346, NA. By July 1947, the Federal Bureau of Investigation would uncover solid evidence that López Contreras was in fact conspiring with the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo to overthrow Betancourt. See Charles Hauch, 'Dominican Involvement in Revolutionary Plot Against Venezuela in 1947', 19 Aug. 1948, 831.00/8-1948, NA.

¹²⁸ Frank Corrigan to George Marshall, 17 March 1947, 831.00/3-1747, NA.

¹²⁹ Frank Corrigan to George Marshall, 22 April 1947, 831.00/4-2247, NA.

¹³⁰ William Baggs, 'Venezuelan Reds Losing Ground, U.S. Envoy Says', 1 May 1947, *Miami Daily News*, typed copy attached to William Baggs to Frank Corrigan, 5 May 1947, 'Baa-Baz', Box 1, Corrigan Papers.

strong position to do battle with the communists was driven home to many observers later that summer. Interpreting a strike by two communist dominated transport unions (one for electric car operators and one for autobus operators) as part of a broader effort to gain control of the labour movement, the US embassy was worried over its prospects for success. Rejecting communist demands to join the strike, the AD dominated union kept the buses running while the police provided protection against communist attacks. Noting that the real question for the future would be whether the AD unions could convince the majority of the workers, including those in communist unions, that they could secure more from the employers with less effort than the communists could, the embassy's second secretary, William Krieg, was nevertheless clearly impressed:

To my mind, all this adds up to the fact that a popularly supported government with strong roots in the working class is the best instrument for combating Communism. I doubt whether a conservative group in this country would have had the courage to take as strong action against the strikers as AD has. If conservatives did take strong action, they would very probably be faced with a general strike of all labor which not even the use of the Army would be able to beat down.¹³¹

Arthur Proudfit, the head of Creole Petroleum, told the US embassy that he had found the attitude of the minister of labour, Raúl Leoni, to be very reasonable. This feeling was doubtless mutual as the wages of Venezuela's oil workers had risen 35 to 50 per cent in 1946. Combining salaries and benefits, the oil workers were making between \$4,000 and \$5,000 a year, which was roughly what their counterparts in the United States were making. Asked by the embassy if he thought there would be any requests for wage increases in 1948 when the oil industry's collective labour contract came up, Proudfit replied in the affirmative. He added that some increase would be justified in view of increasing living costs and increased earnings on the part of his company at least.¹³²

Having drafted a new constitution, and seen it enter into effect, the Constituent Assembly retired and the stage was set for general elections.

¹³¹ William Krieg quoted in Richard N. Post, 'Notes on Recent Transportation Strike in Caracas, with Particular Reference to the Communist Situation', 28 Aug. 1947; and Richard Post, 'Strike of Communist-Led Caracas Transport Workers Ends in Virtual Government Victory', 10 Sept. 1947, both in 'Venezuela', Box 63, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, NA. Post was head of the Division of North and West Coast Affairs in the State Department. The victory was 'virtual' and not 'complete' because the government settled with the communist unions once they gave up their demand for a wage increase.

¹³² Thomas Maleady to George Marshall, 1 Oct. 1947, 831.00/10-147, NA; Rabe, *The Road to OPEC*, p. 103. Maleady was chargé d'affaires *ad interim* in the embassy.

Corrigan had indicated that he would be interested in a transfer once the transition to constitutional government had been made and in early November 1947 he became part of the US mission to the United Nations.¹³³ His replacement, Walter Donnelly, was regarded by Secretary of State George Marshall and others in the State Department 'as probably the finest FSO we have.'¹³⁴ He arrived in Caracas in time to witness the later part of the electoral campaign and *Acción Democrática's* second landslide.

On 14 December 1947 elections were held in Venezuela for the presidency of the republic, for Congress, and for the state legislatures. Given its poor showing at the last elections, the URD had decided not to run a candidate for president. This probably helped Copei. Its candidate, Rafael Caldera, came in second with around 262,000 votes. AD's candidate, Rómulo Gallegos, won easily with a little more than 871,000 votes. The communist candidate, Gustavo Machado, received 36,514 votes, or roughly three per cent.¹³⁵ Commenting on the elections in a report to the State Department, Donnelly stressed that they were genuinely free and fair. 'There was liberty of the press, radio and speech. While both the Government and the various opposition parties charged that partisan groups disrupted some meetings, the right of assembly was exercised frequently, usually without untoward incidents, in all parts of the Republic; and Acción Democrática was the only Party to officially demand of its members respect for the rights of the opposition.' The Venezuelan people had an ample opportunity to hear and decide for themselves and they had done so with a secret ballot in an atmosphere completely lacking in coercion.¹³⁶

The respect which officials in the State Department had come to have for Acción Democrática was shared by the analysts of the Central Intelligence Agency. Since CIA perspectives on Latin America are only beginning to be clarified with the aid of declassified documents, the Agency's report on the Venezuelan elections is worth quoting at length:

The social and economic progressivism of the revolutionary Junta (to a continuation of which the newly elected Government is firmly committed) has been clearly demonstrated. Acción Democrática's leaders, out of an avowed determination to make AD a 'popular' party, have deliberately sought, and won, support from all segments of the population. AD is not, therefore, a strictly working-class party, but rather a coalition of those groups that are seeking to promote the industrialization of the country, extensive land reforms, better

¹³³ See Frank Corrigan to Jack Flatau, 21 April 1947, 'Fl-Fz', Box 2, Corrigan Papers.

¹³⁴ Quoted in Cecil Lyon to Claude Bowers, 15 July 1948, 'March-July 1948', Box 7, Mss. II, Claude G. Bowers Papers, Manuscripts Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

¹³⁵ Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 251.

¹³⁶ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 26 Dec. 1947, 831.00/12-2647, NA.

standards of living, health measures and cultural opportunities for the people; and the establishment of a tradition of democratic processes. The Junta's accomplishments in education, housing, in extension of the trade-union movement, in improving working conditions in the country's industrial concerns, in basing taxation on ability to pay, in agrarian reform, and in the promotion of agricultural and pastoral production, attest to the progressive trend in Venezuelan public policy... Acción Democrática's policies, and its avowed political philosophy as well, look to a rapid advance in Venezuela toward political, economic, and social equality; and its enemies, especially among the elements that governed the country in the past, miss no opportunity to identify it as a 'radical' party and as a threat to the status quo. Some go still further, and describe it as a disguised Communist party; but all the evidence available points to the conclusion that (a) it is not only non-Communist but anti-Communist, (b) it is so regarded by the Communists themselves, and (c) it has gone out of its way to alienate any Communist support... The Acción Democrática does not deserve the Communist label its enemies have sought to fix on it. In fact, the great popular support won by the party in the December elections is another indication that, in the special conditions of Latin American politics, an active non-Communist progressive party constitutes one of the best guarantees against a strong Communist movement. In foreign policy the AD is pro-US and anti-USSR.¹³⁷

Hearing that Betancourt might have a legal problem visiting the United States after he left office – because of his membership in the Costa Rican Communist Party more than a dozen years earlier – Donnelly was outraged. 'Evidence that Betancourt is anti-Communist', he telegraphed the State Department, 'is overwhelming. He has clearly demonstrated that he not only believes in but practices democracy and that he is friendly to US and American interests in Venezuela.'¹³⁸ The visa was provided without difficulties, but the issue of Betancourt's communist background would reappear to cause trouble in later years.¹³⁹

On leaving office, Betancourt complied with one of the anticorruption laws which his government had established and filed a sworn statement estimating his net assets at 1,143.60 *bolívars* (roughly \$380). This represented a considerable drop from the meager 7,500 *bolívars* he had listed on entering office. The US embassy in Caracas noted that he had

¹³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, 'The Venezuelan Elections of 14 Dec. 1947', ORE 65, 5 Jan. 1948, pp. 3–4, 'CIA Reports ORE 1948, 58–65', Box 256, President's Secretary's File, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.

¹³⁸ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 18 Dec. 1947, 831.001 Betancourt, Romulo/12-1847, NA.

¹³⁹ On 24 Nov. 1952, Alex Cohen, an attaché at the American embassy in Costa Rica, referred the State Department to 'irrefutable evidence that as late as Sept. 25, 1934 (that is only eighteen years ago) Betancourt publicly stated "I am and I will be a communist". He may quite well have changed since that time, but his [recent] statement that he has fought communism for twenty years is a deliberate misstatement of fact'. Cohen appears to have convinced himself that Betancourt could be a covert leader of a 'little cominform' for Latin America. Alex Cohen, memo of 24 Nov. 1952, 718.00/11-2452, NA.

lived in a modest house on a modest scale during his presidency and had used the presidential palace only for entertaining. There was no hint that he had 'hidden assets'. Considering the temptations he had withstood, one State Department official commented, his conduct had been remarkable. 'He may reasonably depend on being supported in his old age by the government, provided that all goes well.'¹⁴⁰

The overthrow of Venezuelan democracy

Even more than Betancourt's Junta, Gallegos' government was looked upon with favour by US officials. It had been freely and overwhelmingly elected and – according to a CIA estimate of May 1948 – had shown increasing concern over the potentialities of the Soviet threat and had moved more and more into the US orbit. Communist control of organised labour was decreasing, the estimate noted, and Acción Democrática appeared 'determined to remove the Communists from the labor field in general and from the petroleum industry in particular.'¹⁴¹ In July 1948, Gallegos spent two weeks in the United States as Truman's guest. Ambassador Walter Donnelly reported that this visit had been an outstanding success and that Gallegos had been greatly impressed with US social, economic, and political accomplishments. 'In brief, his visit to the United States confirmed his faith in democratic principles and his determination to strengthen them in Venezuela. It is apparent that he is now convinced that the progress of Venezuela must rest upon free enterprise, free initiative, improved educational facilities and work.'¹⁴²

The State Department was well aware that Venezuela's democracy had significant internal opponents, but it seriously underestimated their strength and their prospects. A State Department memo sent to the White House before Gallegos' visit noted that rightist civilian elements were seeking to overthrow his government. They had received moral and

¹⁴⁰ Richard Post, 'Honest Rómulo of Venezuela', 26 Feb. 1948, FW831.00/2-2048, NA.

¹⁴¹ CIA, 'Vulnerability to Sabotage of Petroleum Installations in Venezuela, Aruba, and Curaçao', ORE 31-48, 14 May 1948, pp. 2-3, CIA Reports ORE 1948, 30-39, Box 255, President's Secretary's File, Truman Library. In general, US embassy assessments shared this view of declining communist influence. A report of early Aug. 1948 did accept the thesis of a *Chicago Tribune* reporter that communist activities during the past month had become 'bolder' and that the Venezuelan government was not effectively curbing the movement. By late Sept., however, the embassy would be praising the forthright response of the government to a resolution from a group of communist oil workers and suggesting that the Voice of America contrast this resolution with one from the anticommunist oil workers federation which had expelled them. Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 5 Aug. 1948, 831.00B/8-548, NA; and Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 30 Sept. 1948, 831.00B/9-3048, NA.

¹⁴² Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 20 July 1948, 831.001 Gallegos, Romulo/7-2048, NA.

perhaps material assistance from Trujillo and might be expected to collaborate with a military revolt should one be attempted. 'Since these elements commanded only about one fifth of the popular vote in the elections of 1946 and 1947 and since most of the population supports the present Government with more devotion than is usual in Latin American countries, a serious revolutionary outbreak – should it occur – would be expected to fail eventually, but only after considerable bloodshed.'¹⁴³ This analysis took insufficient account of anti-*adeco* sentiment within the Venezuelan army and compounded its error by assuming that the Venezuelan minister of defence, Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, would put his loyalty to Gallegos ahead of his loyalty to the army.

Growing resentment within the Venezuelan military at its diminishing political influence under a freely elected administration was apparent within a few months of Gallegos' inauguration in February 1948.¹⁴⁴ It added substantially to existing resentment over various Acción Democrática policies such as the sanctions applied to members of previous governments found guilty of corruption and the encouragement of union organisation.¹⁴⁵ This animosity was skilfully cultivated by Army Chief of Staff Marcos Pérez Jiménez and by Assistant Chief of Staff Luis Felipe Llovera Páez,¹⁴⁶ both of whom, it should be stressed, were seen by the US embassy as unfriendly to the United States.¹⁴⁷ The subversive movement also benefited greatly from the strident anti-*adeco* rhetoric of Copei and the URD and from Manuel Odría's success in seizing power in Peru in late

¹⁴³ Richard Post, 'Possibility of Revolutionary Attempt in Venezuela', 1 July 1948, 831.00/7-148, NA.

¹⁴⁴ 'The general feeling among the Army officers, according to José Giacopini, is that... Acción Democrática has absorbed many of the functions of the Government by placing civilian members of Acción Democrática in high positions which had formerly been under the control of the Army.' Controlled American Source, 'Revolutionary Movement Against the Venezuelan Government', 21 May 1948, p. 4, 831.00/6-448, NA. José Giacopini Zarraga had been secretary general of the junta and had been appointed a governor of the territory of the Amazon by Gallegos.

¹⁴⁵ John Thompson, 'Résumé of Recent Overthrow of Government in Venezuela', 30 Dec. 1948, p. 1, 831.00/12-3048, NA. Thompson was the third secretary of the US embassy at this time.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Post, 'Renewed Activities of the Rightist "Opposition" in Venezuela', 4 June 1948, 831.00/6-448, NA.

¹⁴⁷ 'Lt. Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez, Chief of Staff of the Venezuelan Army and one of the leaders of the young officers in the Venezuelan Army who brought about the Revolution of 18 Oct. 1945, is very ambitious. He is known to be in opposition to the United States, particularly with respect to its military policies regarding Latin America.' Controlled American Source, 'Revolutionary Movement Against the Venezuelan Government', 21 May 1948, p. 2, 831.00/6-448, NA. 'Llovera Páez is liaison officer with the recently named petroleum industry committee on Communist sabotage, on which Embassy Caracas has a representative. He has shown himself to be unfriendly to the United States.' Richard Post, 'Renewed Activities of the Rightist "Opposition" in Venezuela', 4 June 1948, *ibid*.

October. At the height of the crisis, on 20 November, the US military attaché had an interview with Delgado Chalbaud who specifically 'blamed the tension on the desire of the younger officers to have a larger role in the Government and who were encouraged in their desire by the recent coup in Peru and by the constant criticism of the Government by the opposition.'¹⁴⁸

In late December 1948 the third secretary of the US embassy, John Thompson, prepared a well-informed summary of the overthrow of Venezuelan democracy the month before. The crisis, he suggested, had begun on 16 November when Pérez Jiménez met with Delgado Chalbaud and informed him that the armed forces would no longer support a government under the control of Acción Democrática and that it would no longer support him as Minister of Defence if he continued to support the Gallegos government as it was constituted. At that point, the demands of the military subversives who sided with Pérez Jiménez appear to have included exiling Rómulo Betancourt and forming a coalition government in which the *adecos* could retain four posts with the rest filled by 'independents' and army men. On learning of their demands from Delgado Chalbaud, Gallegos requested a meeting with these officers. At noon on 17 November they presented him with a list of the specific changes in the Cabinet and the State Governorships upon which they would insist. By this point, they were reportedly willing to tolerate only one *adeco* at the Cabinet level: Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso, the minister of development. Gallegos replied that while he recognised certain defects in the government, he was the freely elected head of the government, and the commander-in-chief, and he would not tolerate their interference in his administration. To this the commander of the La Guaira garrison replied that the army wanted no more words, but action. The meeting adjourned with both sides apparently feeling that they had made their positions clear.¹⁴⁹

On 18 November 1948, senior *adeco* party leaders met with the commander of the Maracay garrison, Jesus Manuel Gámez Arellano. Gámez told them that he was loyal to Gallegos. Later in the day he informed them that the chief of services of the armed forces, José Leon Rangel, had sought to persuade him to change sides, but that if necessary he would march on Caracas to the rescue of the government. This appears to have been the first information the *adecos* had that Rangel, a potential rival of Pérez Jiménez, had become disloyal. Throughout the day, Delgado Chalbaud argued that a solution should be sought through negotiations rather than bloodshed. Pérez Jiménez and others pressed for

¹⁴⁸ John Thompson, 'Résumé of Recent Overthrow', 30 Dec. 1948, p. 5, 831.00/12-3048, NA.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 831.00/12-3048, NA.

more immediate action. They agreed to give Gallegos some time in which to act; otherwise they would seize control. This message was conveyed to Gallegos on the evening of 18 November. The following morning, a pro-*adeco* paper, *Últimas Noticias*, carried a warning that the support of 300,000 organised industrial and farm workers was necessary to govern Venezuela. At a meeting between Gallegos and most of the senior military leadership, Gallegos indicated that he would accept suggestions for improvements in his administration, but not under the threat or use of force. The military leaders agreed to try to calm down the more hot-headed officers and Pérez Jiménez, finding himself in the minority, agreed to this retreat from previous demands.¹⁵⁰

On 20 November 1948, Gallegos met with his Cabinet and discussed the army's 'petitions'. No changes were made in the Cabinet and the only announcement made was a decree suspending constitutional guarantees because of an undefined 'state of alarm'. For junior officers who had been expecting a victory for their position by means of violence, and for those senior officers who had been hoping for some sort of compromise, this was a source of frustration. Over the course of the next two days, military frustration grew as changes in the government were not forthcoming. Before noon on 23 November the secretary of the presidency, Gonzalo Barrios, announced that the Cabinet had resigned. No names for a new Cabinet were provided, however, and although it was frequently announced that Gallegos would speak to the nation, he failed to do so. That afternoon, in an effort to strengthen the government's position, Lieutenant Colonel Mario Vargas returned to Venezuela from the United States where he had been undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. He was unable to alter significantly army opinion which was turning against a negotiated settlement.¹⁵¹

Early on the morning of 24 November, Valmore Rodríguez, Ricardo Montilla, Luís Lander, and other *adeco* leaders went to Maracay to set up a provisional government in the event of a coup. Rumours had circulated for some time that Acción Democrática was stockpiling weapons and that a general strike would soon take place. These rumours would later be presented by apologists for the military as threats indicating that Gallegos had lost control to party militants and thus forced them to take action. By early afternoon, troops had moved to seize control of the Miraflores Palace, the various ministries, and the radio stations. Finding his Maracay garrison unwilling to support him in a defence of the government, Lieutenant Colonel Gámez resigned. By nightfall, aside from some minor armed skirmishes, a few student and union protests, and some clandestine

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4, 831.00/12-3048, NA.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7, 831.00/12-3048, NA.

radio broadcasts, Venezuelan democracy had been crushed. A military junta consisting of Delgado Chalbaud, Pérez Jiménez and Llovera Páez was established and the Constitution of 1936 was declared the law of the land.¹⁵² In succeeding months, members of both major opposition parties joined in the new government.¹⁵³ The Venezuelan Communist Party also remained legal and continued to function.¹⁵⁴

Coming so soon after the Peruvian coup – and within three days of US recognition of the Odría dictatorship – the Venezuelan coup generated considerable disappointment with US policy in liberal and democratic circles in Latin America.¹⁵⁵ Disappointment threatened to turn into hostility when Gallegos charged, on his arrival in Havana, that the US military attaché, Edward Adams, had acted as a ‘counselor or cooperator’ for the coup plotters and suggested that US oil companies had also been involved.¹⁵⁶ Gallegos’ charges greatly worried Donnelly for their potential influence on Latin American public opinion and on Acción Democrática, which he thought would probably regain power at some point in the future.¹⁵⁷ At his suggestion, a special delegate was dispatched by Truman to meet with Gallegos and explain that Adams’ presence among

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 7–8, 831.00/12-3048, NA.

¹⁵³ John Thompson, ‘Theory and Practices of Copei’, 17 March 1949, especially pp. 3–4, 831.00/3-1749, NA; and John Thompson, ‘Policies and Practices of URD’, 31 March 1949, especially pp. 1, 3, 831.00/3-3149, NA.

¹⁵⁴ In late March 1949, the new Venezuelan foreign minister told John Carrigan, the US chargé d’affaires ad interim, that to ‘take action against Communist unions, simultaneously with that against the AD unions, was not opportune’. Carrigan, for his part, said nothing in defence of the AD unions and instead suggested the establishment of ‘apolitical’ labour federations. John Carrigan to Dean Acheson, 1 April 1949, 831.00/4-149, NA. By Aug. 1949, the military junta had exiled a few communists along with a large number of *adecos*. See William Krieg, ‘Deportation of Communists from Venezuela’, 29 Sept. 1949, 831.00/9-2949, NA.

¹⁵⁵ Disappointment was evident even before the Venezuelan coup as can be seen in the following column by Eduardo Rodríguez Larreta: ‘A characteristic sign of what we are talking about is the attitude adopted toward the Peruvian military coup; a coup conducted by force, and without extenuating circumstances, against the rule of law. Not even the traditional consultations among foreign ministries have been initiated to consider whether that government should be recognised. Today we learn that the United States has, on its own account, decided on recognition; an example which will surely be followed by others in the hemisphere. Just as we attribute part of the responsibility for retrograde developments to the weakness and disunity of the democratic forces, it doesn’t hurt to add that the indifference which the United States is displaying toward the organisation and life of the countries of “the good neighbourhood”, conspires terribly against the future of these republics. The simple moral support of that formidable nation constituted a great point of leverage for the democracies against totalitarian tendencies.’ ‘Latino-América crucificada’, *El País* (Montevideo), 23 Nov. 1948.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in a press release issued by the State Department on 10 Dec. 1948, reproduced in a circular to US ambassadors in Latin America, 13 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1348, NA.

¹⁵⁷ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 9 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-948, NA.

Venezuelan army officers on the day of the coup was accidental, that Adams had not intervened but only sought information, that no evidence had been found indicating intervention by US officials or US interests, and that the United States had always been friendly toward his administration.¹⁵⁸ Gallegos accepted these explanations publicly in a statement to the press and also in a personal letter to Truman.¹⁵⁹

As Gallegos was apparently unaware of the activities of Robert Brinsmade, no attempt was made to inform him of Brinsmade's conduct.¹⁶⁰ A private US lawyer in Caracas, Brinsmade boasted to Donnelly of having provided the coup plotters with advice and assistance on the day of the coup.¹⁶¹ He was reprimanded for damaging the US reputation for neutrality in internal Venezuelan politics and informed that the State Department could not undertake to protect him in the event that a subsequent Venezuelan government brought charges against him for his activities.¹⁶² Donnelly had thought that Gallegos might have considered Brinsmade as an agent of the oil industry. He was convinced that this was not the case and that the oil companies had remained neutral.¹⁶³ He was certainly correct that the larger oil companies like Creole had established a good working relationship with the *adecos* and recognised that their long-term interests would be threatened by forsaking political neutrality.¹⁶⁴ Gallegos had, in fact, no information indicating oil company involvement. He had merely suspected that some of the companies were hostile to Acción Democrática and might have acted on that hostility.¹⁶⁵ At least as far as one of the smaller companies was concerned, he was undoubtedly correct in his assumption as to their attitude. In a letter to George Marshall of 5 December 1948, the chairman of the stockholder's

¹⁵⁸ Leroy Mallory to George Marshall, 13 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1348, NA. C. Allan Stewart appears to have been the delegate dispatched.

¹⁵⁹ Rómulo Gallegos to Harry Truman, 15 Dec. 1948, Confidential File, White House Central Files, Truman Library. See also Joseph Flack to Dean Acheson, 19 Jan. 1949, 831.00/1-1949, NA.

¹⁶⁰ Leroy Mallory to George Marshall, 13 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1348, NA.

¹⁶¹ Walter Donnelly, memorandum of conversation with Robert Brinsmade, 7 Dec. 1948, attached to Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 10 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1048, NA.

¹⁶² Acting Secretary of State Lovett to the embassy in Caracas, 10 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-848, NA.

¹⁶³ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 9 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-948, NA.

¹⁶⁴ If anything Creole's Arthur Proudfit appears to have desired a continuation of the Gallegos administration. In May 1948, he told Richard Post of the State Department's division of north and west coast affairs that he had been worried about a possible rightist coup attempt in the months before Gallegos' inauguration and while he could not imagine such a coup succeeding, he thought that it might do great harm both materially and politically. Richard Post, 'Renewed Activities of the Rightist "Opposition" in Venezuela', 4 June 1948, 831.00/6-448, NA.

¹⁶⁵ Leroy Mallory to George Marshall, 13 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1348, NA.

committee of Pantepec Oil, William F. Buckley, left no doubt of the hatred that he and his colleagues had for the *adecos*:

The Betancourt–Gallegos regime received an estimated \$378,000,000 for oil royalties alone for the period January 31, 1946 to the present time. Revenue from oil taxes, other than royalties, and other taxes, undoubtedly amounted to three times this figure. Only a small part of this income has been accounted for, and it is generally believed in Venezuela that the difference has been used to subsidize scurrilously anti-American newspapers (notably *El Nacional* of Caracas, official party organ of the Acción Democrática Party) pro-Moscow propaganda in the balance of Latin America and, in direct violation of the Pan-American Pact, in armed attempts to unseat the governments of Nicaragua and Santo Domingo, and to strengthen irresponsible Red-dominated labor unions. In short, Betancourt, a professed ex-Communist, and his puppet, Gallegos, have used the vast dollar resources of the country which they controlled to further Russian communistic interests in the Western Hemisphere, and they have forced American capital to provide the money for this anti-American campaign... The new government, in my opinion, has the backing of those Venezuelans who believe in free enterprise and in the old doctrine of working for a living.¹⁶⁶

A brief digression is in order at this point with regard to the US military attachés in Latin America. Some of them held views of the world which bore roughly the same relation to reality as Buckley's. Although it is not unreasonable to suspect those with such a warped perspective of engaging in antidemocratic activities, it must be stressed that no evidence has yet come to light to justify such suspicions. In general, the military attachés appear to have recognised their subordination to civilian authority and followed the orders of the ambassador and the State Department. They were often poorly trained, however, lacking fluency in the local language, and prone to accept the opinions of their local sources of information.¹⁶⁷ Nowhere were their weaknesses more painfully apparent during the Truman years than in Venezuela. Within a few weeks of the October coup which brought Betancourt's junta to power 1945, the assistant military attaché (MA) in Caracas was developing a lengthy argument from

¹⁶⁶ William Buckley to George Marshall, 9 Dec. 1948, FW731.02/12-548, NA.

¹⁶⁷ After the event, Edward Adams acknowledged that he had 'thoughtlessly contributed to anti-United States propaganda' and that his presence among military officers at the start of the coup had been improper although it 'appeared at that time to be a logical way to obtain information'. He also admitted that during lunch at the tank battalion's officers club, 'A civilian at the table talked excitedly to me but his Spanish was entirely too rapid for me to comprehend; besides, I was trying to question the officers concerning their military plans.' Edward Adams, memoranda of 6 Dec. 1948 enclosed with Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 11 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-1148, NA. Adams does not seem to have recalled being warned twice beforehand by the ambassador to avoid contact with Venezuelan officers during the crisis. See Walter Donnelly to LeRoy Irwin, 22 March 1949, *ibid.* Irwin was head of army intelligence and in this letter Donnelly spelled out his reasons for wanting Adams' transferred. Donnelly did not question Adams' motives, but he did deplore his judgement.

'authoritative' sources that this change of government was merely part of a larger conspiracy in which Betancourt and the others were planning to turn power over to López Contreras. 'This masterpiece of untrammelled imagination', Ambassador Frank Corrigan commented to the State Department, 'does not even have the merit of as much logic as is to be found in current paper-backed detective stories'.¹⁶⁸ Within a few months, Corrigan and Allan Dawson, the embassy consul, would be nostalgic for such relatively mild errors. By January 1946, Dawson was referring to the reporting of the military attaché as 'typical of his hysteria, lack of judgement and failure to consult Embassy in time of stress', and urging the State Department to ignore it.¹⁶⁹ By early February, he was suggesting to Corrigan that it was time to get the MA office cleaned out. The MA and his assistant had just put out a thirteen-page report devoted to 'proving' that Betancourt and his colleagues were really communists, that their unfriendliness to the Communist Party was just a ruse, and that they were embarked on a deep plot to communise the country. Plans should be made, the MA had advised, in case counterrevolutionary activity failed to resolve the matter without US action.¹⁷⁰

While the personnel of the military mission were replaced, the problem of poor military intelligence persisted as the military air attaché adopted a similar line.¹⁷¹ He, too, was replaced. Edward Adams, ironically enough, was an improvement over some of his predecessors. Nor was the problem of poor intelligence restricted to the military mission in Caracas. In Washington, army intelligence dissented from the CIA's enthusiastic assessment of Acción Democrática and the Venezuelan elections of 1947. It suggested that the *adecos* might cooperate with the communists in the future if it seemed expedient, that the junta had not been democratic in its orientation, that it had accomplished little in the way of social and economic reform except on paper, that AD's nationalism might pose a threat to US interests, and that AD's pro-United States policy represented expediency.¹⁷² It was not until May 1948 that army intelligence was

¹⁶⁸ Frank Corrigan, 'Inaccuracy of Reports from Military Attaché's Office', 20 Nov. 1945, and enclosures, 121.5431/11-2045, NA.

¹⁶⁹ Allan Dawson to James Byrnes, 19 Jan. 1946, 831.00/1-1946, NA.

¹⁷⁰ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 7 Feb. 1946, File: 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

¹⁷¹ After leaving his position as military air attaché, Carl Gordon Wagner remained in Caracas working for a local airline and continued to send reports to the embassy and to various people in Washington claiming that the principal *adecos* were really communists. Although the issue was too clear for debate, an embassy employee explained to Richard Post, the ambassador did not wish to offend Wagner, but rather to receive and consider any information which his excellent contacts in antigovernment circles might provide. Tom Mann to Richard Post, 12 Jan. 1948, 831.00B/1-1248, NA.

¹⁷² Dissent of the Intelligence Division of the Department of the Army, Enclosure 'A', attached to CIA, 'The Venezuelan Elections of 14 Dec. 1947', ORE 65, 5 Jan. 1948,

willing to join with the rest of the intelligence community in a strongly favourable assessment of AD and its intentions.¹⁷³

Even before becoming assistant secretary of state in September 1945, Spruille Braden had sought to deal decisively with the problem of poor military intelligence. He suggested to Nelson Rockefeller that reporting by military and naval attachés 'be limited to the technical subjects on which they are competent and they should *not* report on political, economic, social and other problems extraneous to their training, experience and usually their abilities'.¹⁷⁴ While Braden did not succeed in that endeavour, he did generally succeed in making it clear who was in charge.¹⁷⁵ This is evident in a report which Dawson sent Corrigan after attending a conference of military attachés and other intelligence officers for Latin America. Predicting that the MAs would be more cooperative than in the past, Dawson observed that 'It has been made clear to them innumerable times by their own people that the Ambassador or Chargé d'Affaires *ad interim* is the chief representative of the United States in the country in which stationed, the coordinator of *all* activities and, thus, the boss'.¹⁷⁶

In a series of memos to the State Department on this conference, Dawson praised its work and suggested ways of building upon it. While the final report was not authoritative, he observed, a copy might be sent to the ambassadors in the region where it could prove useful 'in dealing with their Military Attachés if the latter tend to get off the reservation ideologically'.¹⁷⁷ The newer MAs seemed to him much more professional than the older ones. They were delighted to restrict their political reporting and follow the embassy's lead.¹⁷⁸ As an indication of this

pp. 3-4, 'CIA Reports ORE 1948, 58-65', Box 256, President's Secretary's File, Truman Library.

¹⁷³ CIA, 'Vulnerability to Sabotage of Petroleum Installations in Venezuela, Aruba, and Curaçao', ORE 31-48, 14 May 1948, pp. 2-3', CIA Reports ORE 1948, 30-39', Box 255, President's Secretary's File, Truman Library.

¹⁷⁴ Spruille Braden to Nelson Rockefeller, 22 Jan. 1945, 121.54/1-2245, NA.

¹⁷⁵ See S. J. Chamberlin to Spruille Braden, 17 June 1946, and the enclosed directive of the same date by Deputy Chief of Staff Thomas Handy, FW121.54/6-1746, NA. Handy's directive reiterated civilian authority over the MAs, and MA reporting, but it dug in its heels over requiring the MAs to reveal the identity of all sources upon request. It told the MAs only that they 'may' reveal sources.

¹⁷⁶ Allan Dawson to Frank Corrigan, 15 Jan. 1947, File: 'Dawson, Allan', Box 3, Corrigan Papers.

¹⁷⁷ Allan Dawson to Ellis Briggs and John Dreier, 20 Feb. 1947, Memos Relating to General Latin American Affairs, Box 12, Records of the office of American Republic Affairs, NA.

¹⁷⁸ Allan Dawson to Ellis Briggs and John Dreier, 20 March 1947, *ibid.* Box 13, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, NA.

progress, Dawson noted that most of the MAs appeared largely to reflect the views of their ambassadors.¹⁷⁹ In the conference's final report, he was particularly pleased with the explicit recognition that there had been no widespread move to reduce military forces in Latin America with the end of the war. He expected that this would be useful in future discussions with army representatives on the need for armaments limitation. He was also pleased with the political section where 'contrary to some military thought, a clear distinction is made between communism and the native socialistic parties which are friendly to the United States, with it being stated clearly that the latter have grown more than the former'.¹⁸⁰

While evidence has yet to come to light which would suggest that US military or business interests played a significant role in overthrowing the Gallegos government – or any other government in Latin America during the Truman years – the fact remains that US policy did nothing to help preserve Venezuelan democracy. Although Donnelly appears to have genuinely sympathised with the democratic side in the struggle, he prided himself on having maintained political neutrality with regard to an internal Venezuelan dispute. He was oblivious, as Bethany Aram has observed, to any role which he might have had in preventing a coup.¹⁸¹ He did not engage in any calculation as to how seriously US interests would be adversely affected by a military seizure of power, he simply took it for granted that he should not look for ways to tip the scales in the struggle in an effort to avoid such an outcome. As a result, he overlooked a number of opportunities in which a mild US intervention might have helped to do just that.

A few weeks after the coup, Donnelly met with Rómulo Betancourt in the Colombian embassy in Caracas. Betancourt stated emphatically that he and Acción Democrática were satisfied that the US oil companies and the United States government had maintained a neutral position throughout the crisis. Gallegos, he suggested, had not believed that the military would dare to overthrow him and had been taken by surprise.¹⁸² In hindsight, it

¹⁷⁹ Allan Dawson to Spruille Braden, Ellis Briggs and John Dreier, 2 April 1947, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Allan Dawson to Ellis Briggs and John Dreier, 20 Feb. 1947, *ibid.* Box 12, Records of the Office of American Republic Affairs, NA. At a second conference held the following year, Donald Dozer of the State Department's intelligence organisation found a number of the attachés to be reactionary in their outlook. At the same time, he saw 'an almost eager willingness on the part of most attachés to follow the behests of Washington in so far as those behests are known to them'. Donald Dozer, 'Report on the Second Latin American Intelligence Conference, 18 Feb. 1948, Box 48, File 4, Donald Marquand Dozer Papers, the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

¹⁸¹ Bethany Aram, 'Exporting Rhetoric, Importing Oil: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1945–1948', *World Affairs*, Vol. 154, No. 3 (Winter 1992), p. 97.

¹⁸² William Krieg, 'Conversation of Ambassador Donnelly with Rómulo Betancourt', 28 Dec. 1948, FW831.001 Betancourt, Romulo/12-1648, NA.

certainly seems as though Gallegos could have preserved Venezuelan democracy either by timely concessions to strengthen the hand of the more moderate elements in the Venezuelan military or by mobilising AD's strength for a showdown which would have established his authority over the military and enabled him to exile the more important military subversives. The latter course would have risked civil war and the former would have risked inciting those one was attempting to appease, but in both cases the danger of such eventualities seems fairly small. Had Donnelly met with Gallegos at any point during the crisis and expressed his concern over the seriousness of the situation – as Frank Corrigan had done with Betancourt in December 1946 – that action alone might have helped to awaken Gallegos to the need to act. With a little more courage, Donnelly could have offered to make any public or private statements of support for Venezuelan democracy which Gallegos would have considered useful. A clear public statement hailing Venezuela's democratic progress and praising peaceful political change – along the lines of Adolf Berle's speech in Brazil in September 1945 – might have contributed significantly to the survival of Venezuela's democratic opening.¹⁸³

In September 1948, more than two months before the crisis broke, US embassy officials were already aware that Pérez Jiménez appeared to have subversive intentions and that Gallegos had seriously considered replacing him with Jesus Manuel Gámez, the commander of the Maracay garrison. Delgado Chalbaud's reluctance to move against Pérez Jiménez had been reported as the reason why Gallegos had not done so.¹⁸⁴ On the basis of the US interest in the programme of arms standardisation for the hemisphere – to which Pérez Jiménez was opposed – US officials might have urged Delgado Chalbaud to consider the potential benefit to US–Venezuelan relations of a different Army chief of staff.¹⁸⁵ This was not done for the same reason that an effort was not made on behalf of Venezuelan democracy during the crisis: a belief in the wisdom of avoiding intervention where it was possible to do so.

'It is apparent that some changes are in the offing', Donnelly reported at the outset of the crisis on 17 November 1948, 'and I fear the tendency

¹⁸³ On Berle's speech and its impact, see Leslie Bethell, 'Brazil', in Bethell and Roxborough (eds.), *Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948*, pp. 52–5.

¹⁸⁴ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 14 Sept. 1948, 831.00/9-1448, NA. For an early warning of Pérez Jiménez's potential support for an anti-Gallegos revolt, see Richard Post, 'Possibility of Revolutionary Attempt in Venezuela', 1 July 1948, 831.00/7-148, NA.

¹⁸⁵ In March 1948, Pérez Jiménez was sent abroad on a tour of Latin American countries. Reports from various US embassies indicated that he was opposed to arms standardisation and also to sending Latin American troops outside the hemisphere. See Sheldon Mills, circular telegram, 2 Dec. 1948, 831.00/12-148, NA.

is to move away from democracy in the direction of restrictions on the liberties of the people. I hope this does not transpire because Venezuela is trying to make democracy work for the first time in its history.¹⁸⁶ Donnelly clearly sympathised with the cause of Venezuelan democracy, but he considered himself powerless to act on its behalf. The peoples of Latin America themselves, he argued in early 1949, were struggling for freedom and would ultimately obtain it. 'Their efforts in this direction must be free of outside assistance; the people must settle their own domestic affairs in their own way.'¹⁸⁷

This belief in non-intervention was not simply the product of a naïve and misplaced idealism. As long as the national security of the United States was not at stake, US officials were generally convinced that US and Latin American interests would both be best served by the avoidance of intervention.¹⁸⁸ They believed that such self-restraint had proved immensely important in winning Latin American support in the recent past and that this, in turn, had strengthened US national security.¹⁸⁹ Yet they also generally believed that if the states of Latin America were democratic they would be predisposed to cooperate with the United States and some of these officials were willing to engage in mild interventions in an effort to promote democratic progress. Nor was the inevitable tension

¹⁸⁶ Walter Donnelly to George Marshall, 17 Nov. 1948, 831.00/1-1748, quoted in Bethany Aram, 'Exporting Rhetoric, Importing Oil: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1945-1948', *World Affairs*, Vol. 154, No. 3 (Winter 1992), p. 97.

¹⁸⁷ Walter Donnelly to Dean Acheson, 25 May 1949, p. 2, 710.11/5-2549, NA.

¹⁸⁸ In his classic account of the Good Neighbour Policy, Bryce Wood goes so far as to claim that 'The policy of nonintervention renounced one technique, the use of armed force, for the pursuit of any and all policy objectives.' His account does not sustain this assertion and, on the contrary, contains considerable evidence of the willingness of US officials to use force if a situation were to arise in which US national security was directly threatened. If certain European governments were to do in Mexico what they did in Spain, Roosevelt asked a press conference on 20 April 1938, 'Do you think that the United States could stand idly by and have this European menace right on our own borders?' His own answer left no room for doubt: 'Of course not. You could not stand for it.' Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy*, pp. 137, quotation 349.

¹⁸⁹ The apparent success of the Good Neighbour Policy in the late 1930s and early 1940s in fact had a good deal less to do with the US commitment to non-intervention than these officials supposed. They consistently overestimated the importance of their own activities for the formation of Latin American attitudes toward the United States and consistently underestimated the influence of other factors such as the New Deal and the recovery of US capitalism, the threat posed by Nazi Germany and the common hemispheric response to that threat, the aspirations and solidarity of democratic and progressive movements in the region, and the opportunistic pro-Americanism of communist movements for several years before the Hitler-Stalin Pact and for several years after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. They also failed to distinguish between the impact on Latin American attitudes of such things as their refusal to intervene on behalf of US economic interests in Mexico in 1938 and their refusal to intervene against dictatorships such as those of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua or Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.

between these two positions simply a struggle over the best strategy for pursuing US interests. There was genuine sympathy on both sides for the concerns of the peoples of Latin America and an important ideological basis for the antagonism as well. On one side were those who believed that all peoples who were self-governing were likely to be governed well, and who were therefore determined to support the democratic institutions which made self-determination possible. On the other were those who were convinced that if any people did not live free from foreign intervention, in its own national state, its right to self-determination was being violated.¹⁹⁰ The conflict between these two positions was not only a struggle over the ways in which support for self-determination might advance US and Latin American interests, it was also a struggle over the very meaning of the term.

Embracing a nationalist definition of self-determination, Donnelly could convince himself that the Venezuelan people as a whole had somehow chosen to go along as a subversive group of soldiers became dominant in the army and then used that power base of a few hundred armed men to overturn the freely expressed judgement of more than two-thirds of the Venezuelan electorate. This was not the only definition of self-determination which a US ambassador could have adopted. In choosing to adopt it, Donnelly does not appear to have considered alternatives or made any calculation as to what the consequences of different political outcomes in Venezuela would be for US interests. He simply took it for granted that he was pursuing a course which would, in the long run, best serve the interests of everyone involved. Nor was there any reason for him to doubt that the United States could probably come to a tolerable arrangement with almost any Venezuelan political faction which might come to power.

Under a more optimistic scenario – in which US officials had intervened on behalf of Venezuelan democracy and their intervention had been successful – basic weaknesses in Venezuela's democratic opening would still have remained. Some sort of accommodation between AD and the other major civilian parties would have to have been reached for the situation to have stabilised. If a showdown with the subversive elements in the Venezuelan military had been postponed, sooner or later it probably would have been necessary. That these were not insurmountable obstacles is shown by the history of Venezuela after 1958. A persuasive argument can be made that a decade of dictatorial misrule made it easier for the civilian political parties, and the more professional elements within the military, to agree on the value of compromise, civility, and democratic

¹⁹⁰ This formulation of the ideological conflict between nationalism and democracy is taken from E. Kedourie, *Nationalism* [1960] fourth edition (Oxford, 1993), pp. 128–9.

‘rules of the game’.¹⁹¹ But aside from this basic shift, there is little reason why Venezuelan democracy could not have been consolidated in the late 1940s instead of the early 1960s. Neither the Cold War nor capitalism were significant obstacles to such a consolidation. Nor was the hegemonic position which the United States enjoyed in the hemisphere or Venezuelan economic dependency upon the United States. All these things were as important in 1958 as they were in 1948. As far as democratic political development in Venezuela was concerned, they were simply not very important. The factors of decisive importance were Venezuelan and largely those of political leadership. By helping to tip the scales to the *adecos*’ side during the crisis in November 1948, a different US policy might – at most – have helped to give Venezuela’s democrats another chance.

¹⁹¹ See Daniel H. Levine, ‘Venezuela: The Nature, Sources, and Future Prospects of Democracy’, in Diamond, Linz and Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America*, pp. 257–9.