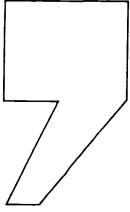


Intervention, Revolution, and Politics in Cuba, 1913–1921



Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

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*Intervention,
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1913-1921*

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Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

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To Susan

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Introduction

The insertion of the Platt Amendment into the center of Cuban national processes in 1901 had an unsettling influence on the Republic. Very quickly, the institutionalized presence of the specter of American intervention made that intervention inevitable; indeed, intervention was as much a cause of instability as it was the result. A national political culture emerged in Cuba organized around Havana's accommodation to, and often manipulation of, the requirements of American policy. Cuba's treaty relationship to the United States generated in the republic a system in which national authorities were held accountable to legitimizing agencies abroad. Under the Platt Amendment, Washington emerged as the center of Cuban politics; increasingly, the Cuban political drama was played for the benefit of an American audience. With foreknowledge of the American commitment to intervene to protect "life, property and individual liberty," Cuban leaders organized a political system around the treaty presence of the United States. By the second decade of the Plattist regimen, American policy had become an integral part of Cuban politics and was one of the most active components of the national system.

United States intervention in Plattist Cuba functioned in a three dimension politico-diplomatic construct. Far from representing the unilateral impulse of a distant metropolitan officialdom, intervention responded in varying degrees to the requirements of larger policy imperatives, the needs of U.S. economic interests, and the demands of the Cuban national system. Indeed, U.S. policy, in general, was indissolubly linked to the vagaries of Cuban politics. The American presence loomed over the polity, used by all power contenders seeking advantage over national rivals. Fierce internal rivalries and intralite struggles for national hegemony provided the basis for collaboration between Cuban politicians and American policymakers. Political rivals in search of advantage served as active and faithful collaborators with the interventionist power. This collaboration was vastly facilitated in a system

where political issues rarely transcended personalities. Not infrequently, the United States emerged the captive of political intriguers in Havana who, over the years, learned to manipulate the Platt Amendment to their advantage with considerable skill and success.

A distinct logic came to characterize the reciprocal behavior of Cubans and Americans. Cubans not only accepted the reality of U.S. hegemony but legitimized American preeminence through complicity and cooperation and, whenever possible and expedient, manipulated American preeminence to their own advantage. Cuban collaboration was at once the necessary cause and the inevitable effect of U.S. hegemony; the intervenors and the intervened together underwrote the viability of the client state.

American hegemony, however, generated sufficient contradictions to limit U.S. influence over, and control of, Cuban national processes. At best, hegemonic relationships represented a mutually self-serving system, during the periods when the interests of politicians in Havana coincided with the objectives of policymakers in Washington. At other times, Cuban leaders managed to carve out of the Platt Amendment an enclave of considerable political autonomy, fully exploiting the limitations and contradictions of American policy.

Between 1913 and 1921, many of the features of the Plattist system began to assume permanent form. Washington began to appreciate fully some of the contradictions of a Cuba policy based on a narrow interpretation of the Platt Amendment. This realization spurred Washington to seek alternative forms through which to preserve and promote hegemonic relationships. During these years, the State Department came to appreciate the extent to which Cubans manipulated American policy within the context of prevailing interpretations of the Platt Amendment. American policymakers showed an increasing disinclination to continue to intervene militarily, devising in the process alternative controls over the Cuban national system. During this critical period, the United States moved gradually from ending political disorders by armed intervention to preventing disorders by politico-diplomatic intervention. At the same time, the Cuban political system was experiencing severe dislocations. Traditional party structures collapsed. The bases of political power narrowed, forcing political contenders to seek new sources of alliances. American capitalists and the Washington policy officialdom moved to

underwrite the solvency of an increasingly discredited and bankrupt republican elite, thereby prolonging its life for another decade.

Washington's interpretation of the Platt Amendment as narrowly defining American authority to intervene, gave way to a view that the Permanent Treaty of 1903 was a *carte blanche* justifying interventions of all kinds. The lowering of intervention thresholds necessarily involved major revisions of existing interpretations of the Platt Amendment and, concomitantly, the development of the appropriate politico-diplomatic apparatus to meet the new requirements of policy. That they were ultimately successful reflected the specific needs of Cubans at the moment as well as the policy objectives of the United States. The withdrawal of marines — never again to return — soon after the arrival in Havana of General Enoch H. Crowder in 1921 as the "Special Representative of the President," signaled, in more than just symbolic terms, the qualitative nature of the transformation in U.S.-Cuban relations.

*Intervention,
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1.

Politics, Diplomacy, and Reelection: The Cuban Electoral Crisis of 1916

Conservative Politics and American Diplomacy

President Mario G. Menocal approached the end of his first term the benefactor of American good will. In 1915, State Department officials in Washington and Havana could review the preceding three years of Conservative government with considerable satisfaction. In contrast to Mexico and the Caribbean, where political conditions were unsettled, Cuba under Menocal conformed in exemplary fashion to American standards of order, stability, and prosperity. The presidential elections of 1912 had seen Liberal incumbents relinquish national administration to Conservative opponents without complications. To be sure, rumors of a conspiracy among disgruntled officials of the outgoing Liberal government of José Miguel Gómez produced some fear in Havana that dissident *miguellista* partisans planned to block the inauguration of the Conservative president-elect.¹ The transfer of power, however, occurred without incident, inspiring confidence in the United States that Cuba had taken an important step forward in self-government. "This orderly transmission of authority," Woodrow Wilson congratulated Menocal in 1913, "is most gratifying and seems to indicate that the Cuban people have successfully undergone one of the severest tests of republican government."²

If American officials derived a certain satisfaction from the orderly conduct of national affairs in Cuba, they greeted the election of Mario G. Menocal in 1912 with particular enthusiasm. The new president was a representative of the nineteenth-century creole families that early anticipated, and ultimately lent support to, American hegemony in Cuba.

4 *Intervention, Revolution, and Politics in Cuba*

After living in the United States for some ten years, during which he completed his education at the Maryland College of Agriculture and Cornell University, the future president returned to Cuba to participate in the struggle for independence from Spain. During the American occupation from 1898 to 1902, Menocal served the military government in many capacities, including chief of the Havana police, inspector of public works, and chief of the Lighthouse Board. With the establishment of the republic in 1902, Menocal retired from public life to join the Cuban-American Sugar Corporation as manager of the newly organized Chaparra Sugar Estate in Oriente Province. Within a decade, Menocal had transformed Chaparra into one of the most successful sugar enterprises on the island. By the time of his election in 1912, Menocal's interests in, and devotion to, the United States had earned him the reputation of being "more American than Cuban."³

Political relations between Cuba and the United States during Menocal's term more than justified Washington's original optimism. The Cuban president scrupulously honored his preinaugural pledge to work within existing treaty relations to resolve all outstanding issues between the two countries.⁴ The Cuban economy prospered. Menocal's first three years overlapped the war in Europe; sugar prices increased steadily. The sugar harvest in the year of Menocal's inauguration sold for 2.15 cents a pound. A year later, the price of sugar rose to 2.75 cents. By 1915, sugar was selling at 3.63 cents a pound, and in the following year, it reached an all-time high of 4.77 cents.⁵

Under the Conservatives, moreover, U.S. control over Cuban sugar production increased. Established American companies reorganized and expanded holdings in the traditional sugar-producing zones; new enterprises, in search of additional land, moved into the virgin territories of Camagüey and Oriente. By the end of the decade, U.S. capital controlled some 50 percent of Cuban sugar production.⁶

The one area of conflict between Havana and Washington involved unsettled financial issues remaining from preceding administrations. Two specific disputes, both involving acts of questionable legality on the part of Menocal's predecessor, troubled U.S.-Cuban relations during the Conservative administration. A paving and sewerage contract awarded to the McGiveny-Rokeby Company during the American provisional government of 1906-1909 had lapsed before completion due to

a shortage of funds. Negotiations between Havana and the J. P. Morgan Company for a \$15 million loan to resume the project drew protests from Speyer and Company, the financial agents underwriting the original contract. Negotiations with J. P. Morgan, Speyer argued, violated the preferential rights earlier awarded under the Gómez government. Menocal disputed his predecessor's legal authority to grant preferential terms. Disregarding earlier arrangements, Menocal pursued negotiations with Morgan for a new loan.⁷

A second dispute proved more troublesome. In 1913, Menocal revoked a concession granted two years earlier by the Liberals to a newly organized Cuban Ports Company. The original contract, prepared by Norman H. Davis, president of the Trust Company of Cuba, joined British, Spanish, and American capital in the Ports Company to undertake the dredging and improvement of a number of Cuban ports; in return, the company received revenues secured from tonnage and port dues over a period of thirty years.⁸ In the first year of his administration, Menocal canceled the concession on the grounds that it had been granted illegally. Menocal subsequently refused to negotiate the outstanding claims of the stockholders.⁹ In 1915, after prolonged litigation, the Cuban Supreme Court upheld the president's actions.

In both disputes, foreign capital appealed to the State Department for assistance. Owing in part to prodding from Washington and in part to domestic political considerations, late in his first term Menocal committed his administration in principle to search for a compromise settlement satisfactory to all parties concerned.¹⁰

The Political Context of Reelection

A full year before the 1916 national elections, Menocal shattered national quiescence with an announcement of his intention to seek a second term of office. Presidential reelection had long been a source of intense national controversy. In 1901 the Cuban Constituent Assembly — after hours of acrimonious debate — in principle approved the juridical validity of reelection.¹¹ In the arena of practical politics, however, distant from the debates on constitutional theory, reelection served to exacerbate political controversy and intensify partisan struggles. Reelectionism quickly became associated with government fraud, coer-