

# THE BIRTH OF AN AMERICAN EMPIRE

*Roy Arthur Glasgow*  
*Boston University*

*THE BANANA WARS: AN INNER HISTORY OF AMERICAN EMPIRE, 1900–1934.* By LESTER D. LANGLEY. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pp. 255. \$26.00.)

*CUBA BETWEEN EMPIRES, 1878–1902.* By LOUIS A. PEREZ, JR. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983. Pp. 490. \$32.95.)

*JOSE MARTI, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF CUBAN HISTORY.* By CARLOS RIPOLL. (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984. Pp. 80. \$6.95.)

*THE IMPACT OF INTERVENTION: THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC DURING THE U.S. OCCUPATION OF 1916–1924.* By BRUCE J. CALDER. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. Pp. 334. \$22.50.)

The record of U.S. interventions in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean area may be viewed with pride by those who promoted and continue to defend America's right and duty to intervene in its "backyard," but this record is a source of shame and humiliation for those who opposed it and bore the brunt of U.S. military might. Adherents of both causes will find in the volumes under review much to condemn and praise in America's use of power in Central America and the Caribbean. While the authors of these books do not overtly credit Uncle Sam with brilliant Machiavellian instincts in exercising power, they leave little doubt in the reader's mind that such was indeed the case.

All of the authors (excepting Carlos Ripoll) have constructed almost relentless chronological narratives based on attention to significant details rather than trivia. These accounts are supported by encyclopedic archival and secondary sources drawn from several countries. As such, they open windows that allow readers to perceive the soul of American interventionist policies in Central America and the Caribbean. While their accounts are not always consistent as a group, these authors have crafted recognizable patterns from the plethora of documents and published sources, patterns that give shape and meaning to

the design and execution of America's national interest as perceived by the principal actors of the time.

In *The Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900–1934*, Lester Langley provides examples of the motivations and dimensions of American rule in Mexico, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Bruce Calder and Louis Pérez document in fuller detail the subtleties of America's imperial politics and policies.

The early republican period found the Latin American nations continuously at war with themselves and with each other. Although the reasons for this turmoil are not explicitly stated, enough evidence exists to conjecture about the causes. The United States, when faced with warring nations close to its borders and increasing North American and foreign penetration of capital affecting or perceived as affecting its security interests, adopted intervention as a way of life, a habit that became almost as American as apple pie.

Convinced that the problem was mostly an absence of democracy, U.S. presidents gave priority to teaching this alien doctrine and process in its "conquered" territories. Perhaps no president exemplified this tendency more than Woodrow Wilson. Langley indicates that Wilson initially "gave every indication of a more cordial relationship with Latin America" (p. 77). He came to the presidency despising imperialism but ended up embracing it. The central element in his and his predecessors' policies was the armed forces, specifically the navy.

Another important instrument of President Wilson's policies was Henry Lane Wilson, the dean of the diplomatic corps in Mexico and kingmaker as well as kingbreaker. Because Lane was virtually the Mexican copresident, his refusal to deal with de facto President Victoriano Huerta probably contributed much to instability and internal strife. The ambassador's and President Wilson's deeply subjective view of Huerta as well as their sense of what the Mexican people deserved conditioned the times and the future course of Mexican history. Henry Lane Wilson intended to "educate the Mexican people" in the niceties of democracy and of electing "good men." But the wily ambassador also envisioned his role as being the "protector of United States business interests."<sup>1</sup> Military officers such as Smedley Butler, L. W. T. Waller, and William Banks Caperton became instruments of American military intervention in promoting and defending these goals.

Washington's preoccupation with Nicaragua, Augusto Sandino, and his contemporary offspring seems to have come full circle. Langley's detailed account of the Nicaraguan leader is sympathetic. Sandino declared, "I want a free country or death." This statement articulates cogently the nationalistic sentiments of many Central Americans. U.S. policymakers, insensitive to the growth of nascent nationalism in the

region or perhaps convinced that such sentiments were the prerogative of North Americans, employed the U.S. armed forces to resolve what apparently should have and could have been resolved in many instances through diplomacy.

In defending and promoting North American business interests, Washington was oblivious to the necessity for change. Indeed, within the complex web of geopolitical, commercial, and political considerations, change—incremental or otherwise—was anathema to U.S. interests. Thus in the struggle to carve out an American empire, the people of Central America and the Caribbean became pawns and were victimized by larger forces and interests.

The final chapter of Langley's *Banana Wars* pulls together the disparate patterns shaping the course of American intervention and some lessons that are "instructive for our times." It is this reviewer's belief that the contemporary lesson is best exemplified in the words of a former marine who hunted Sandino: "He was a patriot who was a nationalist . . . determined to destroy the feudal clerical system which then obtained in Nicaragua . . ." (p. 219).

Louis Pérez is the latest to tell the tale of the sordid aspects of U.S. intervention in Cuba in his *Cuba between Empires, 1878–1902*. One would have thought that after Hugh Thomas's monumental book on Cuba, little remained to be detailed about Cuba during this period.<sup>2</sup> Employing uncanny historical insights and solid investigative skills, Pérez demonstrates a flair for emphasizing the difference between the important and the unimportant. He tells a story of the Cubans as victims as well as agents, fleshing out the latter aspect in this excellent study. Even though one may argue that the United States eventually established a caudillo relationship with the island, the Cubans were far from being mere objects or passive onlookers in the consumption and hijacking of their society. Rather, despite their conflicting goals and the heterogeneous nature of the separatist coalition, they were able to influence, modify, and somewhat compromise Washington's Latin American policy, which contained a pathological fear of conflict as an essential ingredient of social change.

Cuban dependency began as a result of its colonial relationship with Spain. Even before this relationship was terminated, the seeds of another dependent link (with the United States) were being sown. This situation was an inevitable by-product of Cuba's geographical destiny as well as the enormous potential and developing economic power of its northern neighbor. Thus in a curious way, the eclectic Cuban elite concluded that their commercial, economic, and political future lay with the United States rather than with Spain. In spite of its "ideological diversity," the conservative elite was able to establish common cause

with the populist, but diverse, *independentistas*—soldiers and civilians whose social programs and goals struck fear in the hearts of their erstwhile allies. But it was precisely this growing approximation to the United States that precluded a truly independent Cuba.<sup>3</sup>

That the various groups were able to talk to each other, much less “unite” for Cuba Libre (whatever it meant to them individually), was an incredible achievement. Pérez observes, “The internecine feud of the war became a fratricidal struggle for peace” (p. 250). The diverse Cuban agrarian and commercial bourgeoisie followed a course of action that promoted their own interests over national interests, a choice that coincided with Washington’s neocolonial and annexationist designs. Pérez describes a colonial world of political fragmentation and complex relationships among opportunities, principle, pretense, perfidy, conservative class interests, and annexation; he aptly points out that in such a situation, maintenance of the colonial socioeconomic structure conflicted with the goals of the insurgents—the destruction of the planter class, the colonial economy, and the attainment of total independence.

But larger and more powerful forces were also at work in Cuba. Pérez’s central theme is not only that Cuba was employed as a launching pad for U.S. imperial interests but that the calculated and conservative management accompanying it ensured survival of a colonial patron-client relationship within and without Cuba.

Perhaps unintentionally, these authors (except Carlos Ripoll) covertly stress the conservative and antirevolutionary character of Washington’s Latin American policies, which were bent on maintaining the status quo through the deployment of its armed forces. It is worth noting that the issue was not anticommunism in Cuba nor elsewhere, but whether the social changes envisaged and advocated by the new emerging revolutionary forces led by Máximo Gómez, José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Calixto García among others were compatible with the national interests of the United States and, secondarily, with the interests of the Cuban landowning, banking, and commercial elites. They were not. As Professor Pérez notes, “too many decisions . . . were made to accommodate American needs rather than advance Cuban objectives” (p. 250).

A later chapter of *Cuba between Empires*, “The Construction of a Colonial Army,” outlines closely the subservient links of dependency that were institutionalized into the structure of the new Cuban armed forces as a means of compromising their loyalty to Cuba. The army was to be a “modernizing” force instructing the Cuban people in the principles of good citizenship while ensuring Cuban loyalty to the interests of their “conquerors.” An important interest segment was the business class, whose property rights were safeguarded by the rural militia as

one of its primary responsibilities. Students of U.S. foreign policy and the influence of business on its design, purpose, and implementation may find much food for thought in this section.

Finally, several authors have accused the United States of contributing to the deterioration of race relations in Cuba.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Pérez devotes only a paragraph to this important problem (p. 342), and his earlier description of the politics that almost paralyzed the separatist forces gives no importance to the racial angle as it pertained to Antonio Maceo. The racial weapon was employed effectively by the Spanish forces as well as by some elements of the separatist polity who saw Cuban blacks as a “threat to a free Cuba.”<sup>5</sup> Pérez does provide some juicy tidbits, however, just enough to whet the reader’s appetite for more. The North American military establishment was determined to eliminate the preponderance of blacks in the Liberation Army and to construct an all-white replacement—and it did. “The call for volunteers for the new service specifically enjoined only white Cubans to apply” (p. 342). In both method and content, *Cuba between Empires* is a magnificent contribution to Cuban history. Its extensive and intensive research makes it a landmark of Cuban historical scholarship on this period.

Carlos Ripoll’s *José Martí, the United States, and the Marxist Interpretation of Cuban History* explores various facets of the Cuban founding father. Although this modest study reviews several aspects of Martí’s ideas on the United States and democracy, its central thrust appears to be a single-minded effort to debunk the Marxist co-optation of Martí’s writings.

As early as the Sierra Maestra days, Castro declared that “our revolution is based on the ideals of Martí.” Thus Fidel joined the long line of Cubans who have identified their personal goals with those of Martí. Since his death in 1895, Martí’s writings have been used and misused to prove or disprove virtually any point of view. This repeated manipulation is evidenced in both the philosophical underpinnings of the Cuban Revolution and the establishment of Radio Martí.

Ripoll takes Philip Foner to task by identifying what he describes as inaccuracies in Foner’s work. At times Ripoll’s attack almost descends into an acrimonious debate over conflicting ideological preferences. In other words, Ripoll’s *José Martí* contains a controlled savaging, nitpicking, and occasional splitting of hairs. Another Ripoll target is John Kirk, who is accused of stating “unfounded assumptions” and “misquoting Martí.” Ripoll states, “At the core of Martí’s thought is his great belief in and commitment to the preservation of individual freedom.” He then demonstrates the incompatibilities between Marxist philosophy and Martí’s ideals.

Displaying an easy familiarity with Martí’s works, Ripoll draws

parallels and cites inconsistencies in the “rewriting of Cuban history to accommodate Marxist-Leninist goals” (p. 42). Ripoll is correct in emphasizing that the conflict between Martí and Máximo Gómez was not due to the latter’s selfishness but to Martí’s undying commitment to civilian rule rather than the military rule represented and advocated for the future by Gómez and Maceo.

Has Ripoll won the war of words in this struggle to interpret Martí and the Martiano past? I believe it is too soon to say. As long as scholars of varying ideological stripes continue to struggle for “control of the Cuban past,” to second guess and speculate on what Martí meant or might have meant and what his concept of freedom might have been had he lived, the debate will be polemical and perhaps inconclusive.

Another complex relationship is that between the Dominican Republic and United States. In *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic during the U.S. Occupation of 1916–1924*, Bruce Calder traces the reasons for the intervention as well as the profound changes introduced by the invaders. Calder’s work is a victory for history as well as interdisciplinary studies. His scholarship is balanced with analysis supported by massive archival and documentary sources, many of which were previously unknown or unused. Readable and detailed, this book is well organized and rich in new information.

“The more things change, the more they remain the same” is certainly true of events during and after the Dominican intervention. Calder concludes that although the occupation introduced “significant changes,” Dominican society “remained surprisingly similar” to preintervention days (p. 238). Employing a range of interdisciplinary tools, the author examines the most important facets of North American influence and implicitly demonstrates the difficulties, horrors, costs, and nonproductive results of invasions, whether they are promoted in the name of ideology, geopolitics, economic factors, “missionary impulse,” or the “white man’s burden.”

Calder substantiates his argument that the economy moved from colonial dependency to another form of dependency manipulated by foreigners. Within this framework, one can detect a colonial dependency reflecting the long historical association with Spain and the emerging satellite dependency as the Dominican commercial and economic elite became more identified with the interests of its giant mainland neighbor.

Most effective are Calder’s structural analyses of the guerilla war, caudillismo, and day-to-day involvement in a broad range of activities by a colonial bureaucracy with experience in the emerging imperial order in the Philippines, Central America, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. If Calder has not written the last word on this period of U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, he has come close to doing so.

Overall, the scholars who have produced this group of works have opened new areas in describing and analyzing the growth of America's political, economic, and military power in the derisively named "banana republics." In short, their volumes trace the "history of unequal relations that have shaped the psychological attitudes of both sides to this day."<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 520. See also Charles C. Cumberland's popular work, *The Mexican Revolution: Genesis under Madero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1952).
2. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 245–416.
3. Hélio Jaguaribe, *Political Development: A General Theory and a Latin American Case Study* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 380.
4. Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *Cuba: The Making of a Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968).
5. Thomas, *Cuba*, 306, 323, 326, 380. See also John M. Kirk, *Jose Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Nation* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1983); and Magdalen M. Pando, *Cuba's Freedom Fighter, Antonio Maceo* (Gainesville: Felicity Press, 1980).
6. Laurence Whitehead, "Explaining Washington's Central American Policies," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15, pt. 2 (1983):321–63.