

# American Opposition to Machado

## Introduction

American strategic interests in the Caribbean included protecting the Panama Canal and the shipping lanes surrounding it and preventing Europeans from meddling in hemispheric affairs either militarily or economically. Cuba, guarding access to the Caribbean and a key trading and investment partner with the United States, had always been a closely watched interest for US policy makers even as far back as Thomas Jefferson, who pondered the possibility of including the island in American's empire. Most interpretations of US/Cuban relations describe the United States as a political and economic hegemon vis a vis Cuba until the 1960's when all economic ties and trade between the two are suspended. The business community in general is suspected of backing hegemonic relations over minor powers such as Cuba, yet ironically, American business periodicals reporting events leading up to the 1933 Revolution do not support Machado. On the contrary, the press reports painted Machado's regime in negative terms and celebrated Cuba's so-called release from tyranny when he was overthrown. Business periodicals even supported the abrogation of the Platt Amendment, which bolstered American rights and influences on the island. The Platt Amendment gave the United States government the right to intervene in Cuba to protect "life, property and individual liberty" and forbade Cuba from developing any significant ties to any nation other than the United States. Thus, accepting loans, negotiating treaties or granting military bases to other nations was forbidden except with America. Given the authority granted to the United States over Cuba by the Platt Amendment, it seems ironic that the business press recorded no objections to the abrogation of America's special privileges in Cuba.

If the foreign policy of the United States was run primarily for the aggrandizement of American capital, and Machado represented those interests, then one would expect US diplomats to have supported Machado, and to have helped him maintain his hold on power. Such was not the case in Cuba in 1933. Instead, American diplomats heartily condemned Machado. When Machado's troubles began to mount in earnest in the 1930's, they wanted him out of office in spite of Machado's presumed good relations with the American government and business. Perhaps American businesses interpreted Cuba's turmoil as a threat to their investments in Cuba, but backing an established government was always a safer bet than siding with revolutionaries, and American businesses and diplomats rarely prefer to overturn a government who has demonstrated a commitment to free trade and open investments with the United States.

### **Good Neighbor Policy**

American diplomatic initiatives of the 1910s and 1920s (sometimes referred to as Gunboat and Dollar diplomacies) had soured relations between the United States and its southern neighbors. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy attempted to reverse the decline of American prestige in Latin America. He attributed the origin of his Good Neighbor Policy to his reaction against President Woodrow Wilson's invasion of Vera Cruz, Mexico in 1914. Recounting the origins of his policy, Roosevelt said he

. . . began to visualize a wholly new attitude toward the American Republics based on an honest and sincere desire, first, to remove from their minds all fear of American aggression - territorial or financial -

and, second to take them into a kind of hemispheric partnership in which no Republic would obtain undue advantage.<sup>1</sup>

Realizing that Cuba would be his second major foreign policy initiative, (the recognition of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was the first), Roosevelt carefully sent signals of amity and cooperation to Latin America by refusing to intervene militarily in Cuba in 1933 and by renouncing the legal right to do so. Unfortunately, his officer on the scene, Ambassador Benjamin Sumner Welles, did not share Roosevelt's philosophy. Numerous requests to approve military action were turned down by the Administration while Welles plotted to remove Machado from power.

Conditions in Cuba began to deteriorate after 1928 as Cubans became increasingly frustrated with their economic situation. The Los Angeles Times reported in August of 1928 regarding the situation in Cuba:

That president Machado has been highhanded and dictatorial in many of his actions is probably true enough, but that these are the real cause of the revolts is far from likely. Without doubt economic conditions and particularly the low price of sugar have a far greater influence.<sup>2</sup>

This isn't to say that everyone overlooked the closed election in 1928. The American Chargé in Havana refused to congratulate Machado on his "re-election" until he received instruction to do so.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> FDR on the origins of his foreign policy. Edgar B. Nixon, ed., Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 1:20-21. Hereafter cited as Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> "The Revolt in Cuba," Los Angeles Times, August 14, 1929, Part II, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Luis Aguilar, Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), 90. Hereafter cited as Aguilar, Cuba 1933.

American businessmen voiced opposition to the possibility of armed intervention by the United States. In 1929, a businessman representing the firm building the Cuban Central highway objected to a threat of intervention because he felt that it would prevent the collection of money that the government owed his company. The American Chamber of Commerce in Cuba echoed this sentiment upon hearing that deliberations within the American Congress considered intervention in Cuba.<sup>4</sup> Things were heating up and protestors were dying and Cuba was not without a body of exiles in Florida, New York, and elsewhere who ensured the situation in Cuba received attention in the American press and government. But again, in April of 1931, the president of the consolidated Rail Roads of Cuba advised against any kind of intervention.<sup>5</sup> But Machado's enemies expected newly elected President Roosevelt, following the precedents of the past and "exercising the Platt Amendment power," to direct Machado to leave Cuba, and set up a new government. As Machado resisted the opposition in early 1932, the American ambassador to Cuba, Harry F. Guggenheim, recommended to the State Department that the United States government officially make known its lack of sympathy for Machado's policies of repression.<sup>6</sup>

Machado's fight to remain in office cost both the lives of young Cuban rebels and support from the American government. On January 5, 1933, United States Ambassador to Cuba, Harry Guggenheim, "asked for an appointment with the President" of Cuba after "informally conferr[ing] with government officials

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Freeman Smith, The United States and Cuba: Business and Diplomacy, 1917-1960, (New York: Bookman Associates, 1969), 119. Hereafter cited as Smith, US & Cuba.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, US & Cuba, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Guggenheim to Secretary of State, January 25, 1932, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1932, Vol. V, Latin America, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), 5:538.

expressing hope that lives should be respected." He reported to the American Secretary of State that public opinion maintained that "no person under arrest is safe from official vengeance," and objected to the murder of a member of the Student Directorate (a violent opposition group fond of bombing and murdering their enemies). Soon after being arrested by government security forces, this student was found dead with a bullet in his head. Cuban officials initially denied all knowledge of the incident. At the same time, Guggenheim made no protest against the violent opposition groups, nor their threat to American citizens and their property.<sup>7</sup>

The diplomatic cables sent from Havana were full of reports of the violent Cuban government, so much so that the Assistant Secretary of State of the United States, White, felt compelled to comment that he "could see no excuse for this sort of thing and that the continual assassinations, the closing of universities, muzzling of the press, et cetera," were seriously impairing Cuba's reputation in the world.<sup>8</sup> According to Business Week, the recent resignation of "Orestes Garcia, a popular young attaché at the [Cuban] embassy . . . stirred the thing up in Washington." Garcia publicized a letter accusing "the Machado regime of all sorts of murders and outrages."<sup>9</sup> In February of 1933, Ambassador Guggenheim reported eight bomb explosions on the night of the twenty-third, seizures of arms and ammunition, and numerous arrests in Havana, commenting that "reports from the interior are somewhat less reassuring."<sup>10</sup>

The violence dragged on, escalating and hardening the positions of both Machado and the opposition. Machado's "Porra," a secret organization outside of the chain command and therefore not held accountable for murders or tortures, assisted

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<sup>7</sup> Guggenheim to Secretary of State, January 5, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:270.

<sup>8</sup> Memo by Assistant Secretary of State (White), January 10, 1933, Ibid., 5:271-272.

<sup>9</sup> "Cuban Intervention," Business Week, February 15, 1933, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Guggenheim to Secretary of State, February 28, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:273.

the regular police in combating the opposition and worked toward "dispos[ing] of the enemies of the regime."<sup>11</sup> Machado's backers in the Porra resorted to shooting suspects while "attempting to escape," and torturing young rebels. In Miami, "various groups of the Cuban opposition" united to back Mendieta as a new president. These groups attempted to incorporate those already active on the island, including those organizations advocating radical change through violence, such as the ABC and the Student Directorate.<sup>12</sup>

American Chargé in Havana, Edward L. Reed, reported that a bomb exploded near the home of the Cuban Secretary of State on April 13, killing a three year old boy. Numerous other bombs exploded the same day, targeting two churches, a theater, and several schools.<sup>13</sup>

Machado's opposition was actively engaged in terrorism, yet the Americans did not support Machado or report the opposition's atrocities with equal candor. The reluctance to support Machado is due in part to a growing sensitivity toward "democratic" institutions, especially since the "Great War (World War I – 1914-1919) had just been fought to keep the world safe for democracy and much was being made of the ideals of "self-determination." Cuba was nearby, and visited regularly by Americans, so that the dire situation was quite apparent to regular readers of American newspapers, and thus it became an issue for American politicians as well.

## Sumner Welles

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<sup>11</sup> Aguilar, Cuba 1933, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Guggenheim to Secretary of State, March 9, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:274.

<sup>13</sup> Reed to Secretary of State, April 15, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:275.

Elected President in November of 1932, Roosevelt quickly set out to demonstrate his commitment to be a "good neighbor" to Latin America. On April 24, 1933, Sumner Welles was appointed "permanent Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary."<sup>14</sup> Welles, an experienced and respected diplomat with a keen interest in Latin America, expected conditions to improve in Cuba with a change in government and some much needed social and economic reforms.<sup>15</sup> Welles also recognized the necessity of restoring Cuba as a viable trading partner. American exports to Cuba had declined precipitously since the collapse of the Cuban sugar market and the Tariff Reform of 1927. Welles worked to establish a new trade agreement with Cuba that would revive Cuban-American trade. Equally important was the goal of establishing the Good Neighbor Policy as more than a gesture to Latin America. By refusing to invade Cuba, America's southern neighbors would recognize a substantial shift in US policy. Welles declared:

There is no country of the western hemisphere with which our relations should be closer or more friendly than with Cuba; or one, in our dealings with which, the policy of "good neighbor" is more essential.<sup>16</sup>

Welles' arrival in Havana was accompanied with speculation about the necessity of intervention in Cuba, but, as "highly unsatisfactory and even as alarming as they may be," Secretary of State Cordell Hull told Welles that "[conditions] do not constitute a just basis for the formal action" of intervention.<sup>17</sup> And although Welles

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<sup>14</sup> Statement by Welles, April 24, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:278.

<sup>15</sup> Sumner Welles to Roosevelt, July 17, 1933, Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs, 1:316.

<sup>16</sup> Statement by Sumner Welles, Assistant Secretary of State, April 24, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:278.

<sup>17</sup> Secretary of State to Welles, May 1, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:283.

was given a mandate to straighten out the "state of terrorism"<sup>18</sup> in Cuba, Hull told him that all of the efforts made by the US government to ameliorate those conditions were in no case to be construed as measures of intervention. Rather, they were only intended to "prevent the necessity of intervention."<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt, when questioned about US policy toward Cuba at the height of this crisis, said Welles' job was simply to "go ahead and help all you can." But, Roosevelt did not entirely rule out intervention either: "a case of complete anarchy" would provoke an invasion of US troops.<sup>20</sup> Even though the situation was approaching anarchy, the American government remained adamantly against direct interference because of intervention's bitter effect on inter-American relations.

On May 1, Secretary of State Cordell Hull told Welles the United States government was "forced to view with gravest concern" the situation in Cuba, not because of the violence done to American interests, but rather because of the repression, including "brutal assassination" inflicted upon the Cuban people by Machado. He went on to say that he desired no intervention, but warned that Machado's brutality was having a negative impact on American public opinion.<sup>21</sup>

Welles arrived in Cuba on May 9, 1933 and concluded that the situation was "both more precarious and more difficult" than he had anticipated. Welles reported that the feeling against Machado had become "so bitter that he has to go," even though during his first term, Welles believed that "he gave Cuba what has probably been the best government it has had." The current basis of Cuban opposition to him was "the economic depression."<sup>22</sup> Welles' reports to Washington are filled with

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<sup>18</sup> Hull to Welles, May 1, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:284.

<sup>19</sup> Secretary of State to Welles, May 1, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:284.

<sup>20</sup> Press conference, August 9, 1933, Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs, 1:350-351.

<sup>21</sup> Secretary of State to Welles, May 1, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:279.

<sup>22</sup> Welles to FDR, May 18, 1933, Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs, 1:140-141.

accounts of the terror in Cuba. The violence became so great that he finally thought intervention might become necessary.<sup>23</sup> But both Roosevelt and Cordell Hull remained reluctant to intervene. Other members of the diplomatic corps concurred with their reluctance. Josephus Daniels, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, wrote to Roosevelt in July and told him "I have always hated any foreign policy that even hinted of imperialistic control."<sup>24</sup>

Reports of Machado's depredations continued. The manager of the Cuba Company, an American firm, approached Welles and complained that Machado's men, under the command of Major Arsenio Ortiz, had murdered some of their Cuban guards. This was unexpected, since the Cuba Company had been quite friendly with Machado. Welles remonstrated directly to the Cuban Secretary of State who in turn ordered Ortiz recalled from Orient province to Havana.<sup>25</sup>

Welles reported to Roosevelt "President Machado and the three organized political parties of the Republic have formally accepted my tender of good offices. . . ."<sup>26</sup> Welles worked with the groups opposing Machado, attempting to find some sort of middle ground which would quell the rising tide of revolt, and return some semblance of normality and calmness to the island. He soon realized that feelings had become so embittered that no solution short of Machado's resignation would satisfy the opposition.

### **Mediation and Reports of Machado's Violence**

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<sup>23</sup> Welles to Secretary of State, June 26, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:315.

<sup>24</sup> Josephus Daniels (Ambassador to Mexico) to Roosevelt, July 15, 1933, Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs, 1:313.

<sup>25</sup> Welles to Secretary of State, 6:00 PM May 22, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:293.

<sup>26</sup> Welles to Roosevelt, July 17, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:323.

The situation in Cuba became so polarized that Welles felt that Machado's continuation in office seriously hampered prospects for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Machado understood that the mess in Cuba was a bit more than he could successfully handle alone, so, when Welles approached him and offered his services as a mediator, Machado agreed. Initially, his only request was that he not be required to abandon the office of the president.

Welles got to work, and convinced both Machado and the various opposition groups, with the exception of the students (whom he was "unable to attach very much importance to"<sup>27</sup>), to agree to let him mediate a solution.<sup>28</sup> The university professors accepted Welles' good offices, stating that efforts at mediation did "not imply any infringement whatever of the sovereignty or independence of Cuba." These "duly accredited delegates of the University" who supported the students and their demands, recognized the concern the United States and its ambassadors had for the Cuban people and accepted Welles' mediation because:

this tender of good offices has been made by the Ambassador of a government which at the present time is carrying out an anti-imperialistic policy based upon its desire of furthering more cordial relations between the nations of America upon a foundation of absolute respect for the rights of all and, furthermore, because of the outstanding qualities of the person of the mediator.<sup>29</sup>

The university professors were neither stooges of American imperialism nor ignorant of their own history, yet their collective judgment clearly indicated that they did not

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<sup>27</sup> Welles to Roosevelt, July 17, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:323. This is ironic, given that students were at the forefront of both the 1933 and 1959 revolutions.

<sup>28</sup> Welles to Roosevelt, July 17, 1933, Nixon, FDR & Foreign Affairs, 1:315.

<sup>29</sup> Welles to Acting Secretary of State, June 21, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:311.

feel that American actions for at least the first part of 1933 were imperialistic, but rather, were humanitarian, based on the "absolute respect for the rights of all."

Five days later, on June 16, the Federation of University Students at the University of Havana told Welles that they too would accept Welles' good offices.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the month, groups representing all aggrieved factions in Cuba, including the terrorist organization ABC, a high school teachers organization, and labor associations agreed to accept mediation. And, because of pressure from Welles, Machado conceded to the opposition that "he would be willing to leave the government in the hands of a vice-president" when an election period was agreed upon.<sup>31</sup>

During negotiations, Welles did not see the rebels as an obstacle to progress. Rather, "the chief difficulty" was that President Machado kept constantly changing his mind so that no one could tell where he would stand on any given day when reform measures were being discussed and proposed.<sup>32</sup>

As the negotiations went on, violence continued to rock Havana. On July 12, 1933, Welles reported a bomb found in the doorway of the American Club and had "reason to believe" that the bomb was placed possibly by a member of the government secret police. Opposition groups, including the ABC, condemned the bombing, and promised to help find out who did it.<sup>33</sup> Welles was quick to blame Machado when there was doubt about who was responsible for the violence. He did not rail against the openly terrorist ABC or the Student Directorate. Welles wired Washington on July 19, 1933, reporting that he believed that Machado must restore

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<sup>30</sup> Welles to Acting Secretary of State, June 26, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:315.

<sup>31</sup> Welles to Acting Secretary of State, June 30, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:316.

<sup>32</sup> Welles to Acting Secretary of State, July 26, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:328-329.

<sup>33</sup> Welles to Assistant Secretary of State, 11:00 AM 12 July 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:320.

constitutional guarantees immediately, and that Cuba "no longer be subject to the arbitrary rule of the military."<sup>34</sup> Welles successfully pressured Machado to abolish press censorship and release a number of political prisoners. Finally, on July 26, 1933, Machado signed an amnesty bill and restored constitutional guarantees.<sup>35</sup> These were significant victories for the opposition -- accomplished through the good offices of Welles.

On August 7, 1933, Welles reported 17 killed in Havana, and over 100 wounded, emphasizing the "extreme seriousness of the situation."<sup>36</sup> The problem stemmed from Machado's police. The ambassador reported that Machado's men fired on a "completely disarmed and orderly"<sup>37</sup> civilian crowd estimated to number five thousand.<sup>38</sup>

In no case did Welles justify Machado's brutal repression. If Welles wished to lend moral support to Machado, he could have warned that the violence and terrorism, with its resulting destruction of lives and property, were the fault of the opposition. Certainly, the opposition was at least partly to blame. The ABC and the Student Directorate had purposely used terror to destabilize the government and exact revenge. However, Welles never offered excuses for Machado's policies by arguing that repression was necessary to control the elements of anarchy and terrorism in Cuba. Had the situation in Cuba evolved fifty years later, Machado's tactics likely would have been justified as were the tactics of the US supported governments

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<sup>34</sup> Welles to Assistant Secretary of State, July 19, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:325-326.

<sup>35</sup> CFR, The US In World Affairs 1933, 176.

<sup>36</sup> Welles to Secretary of State, 11:00 PM, August 7, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:336-337.

<sup>37</sup> Sumner Welles, The Time For Decision, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 195. Hereafter cited as Welles, Time for Decision.

<sup>38</sup> R. Hart Phillips, Cuba: Island of Paradox, (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, n.d.), 31. Phillips gives a fascinating eyewitness account of events during the Revolution; Welles to Secretary of State, 6:00 PM August 7, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:338.

around the world while attempting to suppress armed insurrections. A decade after Machado's ouster, Welles recounted his frequent conversations with the Cuban leader:

. . . in which time and again there came up for discussion the revolting details of the murders committed by his secret police, particularly those of young patriots hardly more than boys, he never gave the slightest indication that these acts of barbaric cruelty were anything but justified.<sup>39</sup>

On August 8, Welles wired Cordell Hull and recommended that the United States "withdraw recognition of the Cuban government" based on the

unwillingness of my government to continue to lend its moral support to a government which is maintaining itself in power by martial law and through the exercise of brutal methods of repression.<sup>40</sup>

The next day, the Spanish Ambassador complained to Welles of three murdered and sixty arrested Spaniards, and both Britain and Spain threatened action if things didn't change.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Both the United States business community and the American government refused to support Machado in the early 1930s, and actively worked against him, as the President struggled to maintain his hold on power. If this was because Machado no longer held the interests of Americans at heart, then perhaps Machado never was a

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<sup>39</sup> Welles, Time for Decision, 195.

<sup>40</sup> Welles to Secretary of State, 9:00 PM August 8, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:342.

<sup>41</sup> Welles to Secretary of State, Noon, August 9, 1933, FRUS 1933, 5:345.

US pawn and truly placed Cuban interests over Americans. Or, were US businesses and government far more “progressive” than commonly assumed, supporting student revolutionaries over the Cuban president (who presumably was looking after American interests). Both are likely explanations because Machado clearly was a nationalist who placed the economic needs of the nation over American needs when he raised duties on American manufactured goods and foodstuffs that competed with Cuban products, and sought to abolish the Platt Amendment. Also, American foreign policy from the 1920s through the Good Neighbor Policy was significantly influenced by the ideas of Woodrow Wilson and others who promoted “self-determination,” democratic ideals, and non-interference in the affairs of other nations. Either way, Machado received virtually no support from the United States during the 1930s when he needed it most and even found the American Ambassador, Welles, actively conspiring to overturn his government.