

Conclusion

The legacy of Spanish imperialism and conquest, the history of slavery on the island, the attractiveness of Marxism and Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, and the tendency toward armed rebellion all conspired to make a peaceful constitutional succession to Machado's government very difficult. Compounding these problems was the Great Depression of the 1930s and the drop in sugar prices in the 1920s. Democracies take not only time to form, but strong non-governmental institutions and a public morality that reinforces the rule of law. If anything, history would demonstrate that democracies (however imperfectly formed) flourish briefly and shortly in only the most carefully prepared of situations, and then devolve into a form of autocracy (by bureaucrats, or monarchs, or other democratically resistant bodies). This has been the case with cultures over and over from the Greeks to the Romans, even the ancient Hebrews exchanged the judges for a king. A constitutional and representative form of government was imposed upon Cuba after almost four centuries of colonial rule. The political legacy of Spain did not foster a culture of independent self-governing communities and it is unrealistic to expect a culture to abide under a system of laws for which it has not been culturally prepared.

Cuban events in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate that it is far easier to initiate a revolution than to build a nation. Machado designed and implemented an outstanding program of reform leading to economic growth and greater independence. None of his enemies -- especially those who came

to power immediately after his ouster -- were able to offer or implement a fundamentally improved platform.

Machado garnered support for his government and platform through political compromise all the way through 1928, including the constitutional reforms that allowed him to continue in office. Violence was initiated by his opponents and Machado responded with vigor.

A combination of international economic factors (overturning governments worldwide), a truculent opposition, his own political miscalculations, the machinations of Ambassador Welles, and Machado's lack of a personal following combined to destroy his presidency. On one hand, Machado could not have been elected to the presidency in 1924 unless Cuba's democratic mechanisms were sufficiently open. And yet, the Cuban people were not ready to uphold those institutions through periods of distress and chaos -- indeed they were quick to ignore them because the institutions were not deeply rooted. Those quickest to opt for a simple solutions -- the ouster of Machado -- received popular support.

Political Choices in Handling Dissidence

Machado's historical predicament nicely summarizes the conflicts and weaknesses of limited or non-totalitarian governments. Machado's reaction to attacks on his government could be met three ways. First is inaction -- allow the opposition to act, speak, organize, and bomb, caring more for the civil rights of suspects than the survival of the government. This results in a situation where a shadow government, much like the Mafia, or drug cartels in Latin America, runs and controls parts of society through fear and intimidation. If the government does not react, it will lose

popular support by failing to “do something” about the problems. It will be replaced by a government that supports the ideals of the shadow forces (which was the goal of Machado’s opponents), or one that will react and suppress the opposition.

Machado's second option was a limited "war" on his opponents, justified democratically by the opposition’s adherence to violence and opposition to Cuba’s constitutionally elected government. This route rarely provides an optimal solution because in the process of suppressing the violent opposition, new opposition is created. When sons, fathers, daughters, classmates and brothers are tortured or assassinated, previously apathetic members of the society become sympathizers or active participants themselves. Thus, Raphael Trejo became a student martyr in 1930 at the age of 25 when demonstrating against Machado. "Incidental" casualties, or even the unconstitutional demise of the truly guilty builds the opposition’s case against the government. This is why terrorism is such an effective weapon in many countries against incumbent governments -- the government must act to protect itself, and in the long run alienates those who previously acquiesced to its rule. Machado took this course, with predictable results.

The final option is to deny the validity of limited government, create a totalitarian system¹, and wage total war against all opposition. In other words, Machado would have had to reject constitutional government and the rule of law totally, which he did not do. Lawless and unconstitutional activities became regular

¹ A totalitarian government tends to understand the value of all other components of society only in terms of how they advance the cause of the “state.” So whether such a government is Rightist or Leftist, Fascist or Communist is irrelevant since they have more in common with each other than with a limited government (such as a constitutional republic or democracy). A more accurate dichotomy would be between governments whose existence demand the subservience all components of society, and governments who claim to provide an environment wherein citizens and free institutions can pursue their own agendas outside of the interests of the state. Essentially, a limited government does not claim the right nor the means to direct the purposes of individuals or non-governmental institutions whereas a “statist” government presumes such a right and seeks the means to assert such control.

activities, especially with the police forces, but this is significantly different than suspending constitutional government and disbanding the courts and congress, and using the military as the means of repression.

One could speculate that Castro learned valuable political lessons by observing the failure of Machado to remain in power. Machado failed to retain power both because he was not violent enough in his efforts, and because he was too aggressive in suppressing opposition; he fell into the middle ground from which defeat in the long run is certain. In order to remain consistent ideologically, and yet crush the opposition totally, all pretenses to limited repression must be abandoned. Enemies of the government are redefined as enemies of mankind, a scourge. National Socialist Germany, Soviet Russia, and of course Cuba under Castro has exemplified this approach. Machado was an example of the weakness of a government whose claims to authority are limited and who exercise a relative restraint in the suppression of its enemies.

Ultimately, the security of a people comes from themselves -- their own ability to generate a self-perpetuating belief in the integrity of a common moral code, and a willingness to abide by it. This does not happen in one generation; a cultural, moral and intellectual legacy -- all tightly interwoven -- requires generations to be established (or undermined). Cuba's tumultuous government in the 1920s and 1930s was a reflection of the civic soul of the Cuban nation. The economic catastrophe ensuing from the collapse of sugar prices and the Great Depression created an environment in which the underlying civic virtue was severely tested. It was no aberration that the very same people who rejected Machado's government were not any better at governing Cuba themselves (and if one looks at the Pentarch from 1933 to early 1934, they were much worse). The cream of Cuban society -- educated,

influential, connected – lacked the invisible bonds which perpetuate an idealized democracy, both within Machado’s administration and no less without. This, coupled with a malevolent economic meltdown created conditions ripe for social discord and revolution. Machado accomplished a significant amount of reform considering the obstacles of economic depression, US government interference, and an organized opposition.

For better or worse, dictatorships emerge in complex societies that have lost their internal demands for personal self-restraint, and limited government. Antonio Gramsci, Joan Scott, Hayden White, Michel Foucault and others who emphasize (knowingly or not) the non-material aspects of social psychology and structure understood “government” at its most fundamental level: a collection of beliefs so basic that they have dissolved into unexamined presuppositions of a society. It is this level which requires generations to change and most effectively obviates the “form” of government resting above.

“Self-restraint” is most effective as an unreflected truth.² Likewise, one could imagine (and perhaps only imagine) a society in which morality and self restraint are so embedded that the issue of corrupt governments or political oppression seem something hardly worth bothering about. Finally, it is the intellectual producers, the makers of stories (including historians and other teachers) that profoundly determine the content social “assumptions” and how deeply they are ingrained.

Oppositionist students inspired by a revolutionary ethos worked to overthrow the government before he engineered his own re-election and even before his first term in office. Since the origin of their opposition was not Machado, it was no

² For example, if it is so deeply ingrained that “stealing is wrong,” then private property needs little protection from the state. Perhaps other cultural taboos provide better examples, such as incest. This taboo remains so strong, that it is not a social issue at all.

surprise that once he was removed, they continued their revolution. Had the students been motivated solely by opposition to Machado's "unconstitutional" second term and then to his civil rights violations, they would have been relieved when de Céspedes replaced him in 1933, annulled the constitutional changes of 1928, and restored the Constitution of 1901. This was not the case – they were inspired by revolutionary ideas which motivated them to seek a fundamentally reordering of society, whether or not Machado was in power. DEU students met with soldiers on September 4, 1933, and Sergeant Batista removed de Céspedes and replaced him with Grau San Martín and the Pentarchy (a group of five core government leaders, including Grau). Nevertheless, the ABC continued its murderous attacks, the incidents of labor strikes and social unrest grew, and finally on January 14, 1934, Colonel³ Fulgencio Batista, forced Grau to resign and replaced him with Carlos Hevia for two days and then finally with Carlos Mendieta. Five days later, the US recognized the new government. Machado found himself unwilling to execute the most extreme measures for subduing rebellion, and personally unable to be a weak, ineffective leader (as was Grau San Martín under the Pentarchy). Machado -- although himself a former General, Inspector of the Armed Forces, and Secretary of the Interior -- refused to militarize Cuban society. Batista and the military he controlled replaced the United States as the court of final appeals for all political matters in Cuba. Castro would learn that lesson well. But while Machado refused to use the regular army as a tool of repression, the Porra, his secret police, were brutal. As Ambassador Guggenheim described it, “El Partido de la Porra” (Bludgeon Party) “carries

³ Sergeant Batista was “promoted” to Colonel after he ousted Céspedes and put the Grau government into power.

sanguinary reprisals against violent and especially obnoxious acts of oppositionist groups.”⁴

The middle ground provides an ineffective foundation to subdue opposition and erodes the moral restraints or constitutional awe that would keep citizens docile. The opposition eventually provoked Machado’s Porra to take such drastic and inopportune measures that the President eventually alienated the Cubans who had once supported him.

Ambassador Guggenheim, who had taken active steps to support Machado's opponents, concluded that the 1933 Revolution was "not instigated by inspired leaders, but is born of the misery on the island fathered by *aspiring politicians*."⁵ While Cuba enjoyed the relative prosperity of the pre-Depression years, Cubans remained content with President Machado and were willing to give him a free hand building a stronger, more independent and prosperous Cuba. But economic conditions changed and the effects of the Great Depression provided a window of opportunity for political malcontents. The discontent was amplified as hopes of a job in government, sought by many of the middle class students in university around 1930, eroded.

A group of disenfranchised politicians used the disastrous economic conditions of the early 1930s against the government of Cuba. Though they claimed

⁴ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, January 25, 1930, Havana, 837.00/3227.

⁵ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, November 25, 1930, FRUS 1930. Also see Guggenheim to Secretary of State, FRUS 1930, December 12, 1930, Vol. II, p. 678. Here Guggenheim says "The basic cause of the revolutionary sentiment is poverty, especially in the cities. The immediate occasion is found in the indignant idealism of the students, the leader of the Opposition here cleverly organized the students into a movement for political purification, the sincerity of which is rendered doubtful by the past records of the leaders who have themselves practiced what they condemn, under the cloak of student protests, all factions opposed to the Government including Communists and the unemployed are supporting the street demonstrations." Emphasis added in italics by author.

to seek only the best interests of the majority of Cubans, members of the opposition did not have popular support in the 1928 election or in 1930. Machado enjoyed more domestic support than he is given credit for by most history books.

Machado's detractors point out the President's campaign against re-election and argue that he rigged the constitution to keep himself in power. It is true that Machado campaigned against re-election, and he broke that promise. The manipulation of constitutional procedures allowing another term, this time for six years, also elicited a strong reaction from opponents.

Some historians trace the beginning of the opposition to Machado to the fateful decision to extend his presidency, but this is a fundamental misreading of Cuban history. Opposition to Machado emerged before his second term. The beginnings of the student revolutionary movement emerged between 1923 and 1925, before Machado's first term, and had social aims far beyond the removal of Machado. However, they remained a minority, even when Machado was re-elected. The traditional student government at the University of Havana continued to support Machado at least through his re-election. The armed insurrections of 1930 were initiated by men whose opposition to Machado predates his first election, let alone his second term. Opposition to Machado centered around young and old politicians who aspired to power and yet were unwilling to remain constrained by legal or constitutional requirements. Younger rebels, shooting and bombing their opposition, can hardly be upheld as a more constitutional alternative than Machado. Menocal cannot be considered a better alternative to Machado because he was seeking a third term as president. Mendieta, unable to garner significant political support from Cuban voters without Menocal's help, allied himself with whomever he could, including Menocal, the armed forces, revolutionary students, and the American

Ambassador in his pursuit for power. Eventually he was successful, becoming the President of Cuba in January of 1934 when appointed by Fulgencio Batista.

Because of the drastic downturn in the economy, Machado lacked the normal means of pacifying the opposition. Cuban politics, like in many nations, has generally revolved around the use of government offices as a means of pecuniary aggrandizement and was an expected means of livelihood for many middle class university students. In the colonial period, *Peninsulares* sought government posts, at times by bidding for them, in order that they might acquire a fortune for themselves from graft, corruption, kickbacks, and control of government monopolies. The idea that all political leaders in Cuba sought political office out of genuine patriotic duty was rare. The collapse of the sugar prices throughout the 1920s withheld resources Machado could have used to buy off his political opponents. The downward spiral of sugar prices reached a low of 2 1/2 cents per pound in Machado's second term, and the onslaught of the Great Depression certainly added to his difficulties.

Machado's fall was the result of the natural resentment of his political opponents coupled with brutal (yet insufficient) and unpopular methods of repression, multiplied many times by the effects of the collapse of sugar prices and the Great Depression. A strong economy may have kept him in power and the American Ambassador at bay. Perhaps if the nation prospered he could have maintained his position in power by buying off, or otherwise co-opting the opposition. However, he was unable to do this.

Machado's inglorious place in Cuban history is not because he was an evil man or tyrant -- but because he lost the battle of violence and revolution waged by his opponents. Losers of "popular" rebellions are required to play the role of the villain and Machado lost the Revolution. Had he been the victor, Machado would

have been remembered as a great Cuban hero overcoming jealous and petty political rivals, holding his country together against the forces of global economic depression and communist inspired student revolts. Victims of coups d'etat languish in the memory of succeeding generations -- touted only as an example of what not to do. They lose not only their offices, but the dignity of a respectful place in the memory of their nation.

Generally, the political tide was receding on governments in power around the world in the 1930s. Herbert Hoover in the United States, Adolf Hitler in Germany, Getulio Vargas in Argentina, Adolfo Chiari in Panama, to name a few, rose or fell from power due to the turmoil caused by the financial collapse of the 1930s. In Cuba, this situation was compounded by the rise of the violent youth movements (the ABC) and the collapse of sugar prices. These groups pledged their efforts to the violent overthrow of the political order regardless of the status of Machado's constitutionality. His extension of power in 1928 served as a convenient moral veil and catalyst to justify their violence.⁶

Another key factor in Machado's demise was his relative lack of ruthlessness. This may seem callous in light of the Porra's brutality, but clearly Machado did not possess the "will to power" that has become a hallmark of the strong arm political leaders of the twentieth century. Cuba would not have its superman until 1959 when Castro assumed power. Castro has been the only man in Cuban history to successfully challenge the prevailing traditions of Cuban politics. His success was

⁶ This charge is supported by observing the effectiveness of these men once they had acquired power or after Machado was ousted. Antonio Guiteras refused to support the government and initiated a new rebellion. Supporters of Mendieta's government withdrew because they felt they did not have enough power for themselves. Coveting of power, and desirous of the graft traditionally associated with official posts, these revolutionary patriots seem much more like Cuban politicians before 1933 than a new kind of leader. Thus, continuity of political tradition transcends 1933 -- new faces and new ideologies did not change the fundamental corruption of Cuba.

due not to the superiority of his platform, but rather to the ruthlessness with which he was willing to carry it out. As brutal as his Porra was, Machado was not willing to exercise the kind of brutality necessary to achieve permanence. Machado's police force exercised terror on its political enemies – not on the entire Cuban nation. Without excusing the use of murder or torture, Machado's use of terror was limited and not sufficient to retain his position.

Machado refrained from politicizing the army as both Batista and Castro would do to great effect. The army, although a crucial part of his government, did not do the dirty work of keeping Machado in power. This was reserved for the police force which failed to suppress the rebellion in Havana. No evidence is more telling of Machado's unwillingness to use the army as a means to retain power than the fact that his own officer corps told him that he must leave. The President exercised no purges to replace the disloyal, nor did he stack the officer corps with his political cronies. The same policy was followed in Cuba's civil administration. After Machado left Cuba, the military officers refused to fill the power vacuum and thereby left that role to young Sergeant Batista, who was to dominate Cuba with the help of the army for most of the succeeding years until Castro completed the militarization of power in 1959.

The track record of earlier administrations contrasts significantly with the accomplishments of Machado's first term. Machado used the same political coalition building tactics as United States President Franklin Roosevelt was to use a few years later. He created a government based on inter-party cooperation. Machado rejected the winner take all political creed of earlier and subsequent governments by refusing to purge previous political appointees, including Conservative party members, from his government. Machado sought and obtained the political support from all three

significant political parties for all his major initiatives. By failing to achieve any significant support outside of a disenfranchised few politicians, and radical revolutionaries (such as the ABC), Machado's opponents turned to anyone willing to oppose Machado, including the "communists."⁷ Clearly, the nation agreed with Machado that he was the man who had the ability to rebuild Cuba. Even after the 1928 election, "the vast majority of the Cuban people remained silent and supported Machado."⁸

Machado's second term was more than a power grab, it was his only prudent choice given the political situation facing Cuba, especially considering the likelihood that his successor would have been a third-term candidate (Menocal). Had Machado left quietly in 1928, it is likely that the Cuban political scene would have reverted to the kind of ineffective political leadership characterized by Menocal and Mendieta. None of them were as enterprising, visionary, or committed to the reformation of Cuban society as Machado was. As things happened, Batista emerged from the revolution to direct Cuba's affairs for the next two and a half decades.

Machado's progressive legislative record and his popularity during his first administration portended great things for Cuba and his own legacy. Even Luis Aguilar, no great admirer of Machado, admits "in all fairness" that "Machado's stand for nationalism and his promises of honest government were a firm step in the right direction, and an evident sign for many that times were changing for the better."⁹ It is a tragedy for a nation to fail when the potential is so great and Machado's era reflects not only the fall of a government, but the great promise of what could have been.

⁷ Machado Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, IV-27.

⁸ Hernandez, "The Second Administration of President Machado," p. 83.

⁹ Luis Aguilar, Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 54.