New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 34 | Issue 4 Article 2

1964

Men on Horseback: Latin American Military Elites

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MEN ON HORSEBACK: LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY ELITES*

ORIGINS OF MILITARISM

UNTIL LESS THAN A DECADE AGO, scholars of the Latin American scene had failed to concern themselves with any kind of systematic study of the most powerful political institution in the area. This seemingly incredible neglect resulted from the fact that the institution under consideration was military—namely, the armed forces—and that the scholars were civilian, and that between the two there existed an atmosphere of mutual hostility. To the scholars the term military signified bellicosity, banditry, bloodletting, and a kind of reversion to barbarism which annoyingly interrupted the normal progress of civilization. Military men compounded this hostility and misunderstanding by displaying a deep distrust for these nonuniformed idealistic outsiders who seemed inordinately concerned with the utterly unattainable goals of peace and democracy. Besides, army officers almost never wrote books to defend themselves against the vilification of the scholars.

And yet, much as they despised it, scholars could not completely ignore the army as a national political force. After all, it was pretty hard to ignore the fact that in most countries of Latin America one general or another nearly always seemed to be sitting in the president's chair. Without bothering to investigate this phenomenon of political dominance by military men carefully, the scholars made a number of facile deductions to explain it. Observing that the creators of armies which won the wars for independence from Spain were often

* Part of the material used in this article has been condensed from the author's recent books: *Arms and Politics in Latin America* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1960) and *Generals Vs. Presidents* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964).

scions of the native landholding aristocracy, many of whom had served in the Spanish army, such as Simon Bolívar in Venezuela and San Martín in Argentina, and that it was the tradition in Western Europe for the officer corps to be recruited from the landholding aristocracy, it was simply taken for granted that the post-independence Latin American military elites also had close family ties with the large landholders. This assumption of social identity between the officer corps and the propertied classes neatly explained why in nineteenth-century Latin America the armed forces always seemed to defend the status quo. Scholars, in fact, created stereotypes which revealed more about their hostility towards, than their understanding of, the military's true social and political role. For example, a common stereotype portrayed a wealthy land baron with three sons. Since the law of primogeniture still prevailed, the eldest automatically inherited the job of managing, and preserving intact, the family estate. The second son was intelligent and responsible, so he became either a lawyer or a priest. The third, however, was a "black sheep," and since he was psychologically unfit for any respectable calling, he automatically became an army officer. If one accepted this "black sheep" thesis, it was then easy to explain why so many of Latin America's nineteenth-century dictators were such vicious and irresponsible rogues.

Our recent questioning of this stereotype, coupled with a more systematic investigation of the actual role of military elites, has resulted, I believe, in a much more accurate picture of the interrelationships between the social structure and political processes in nineteenth-century Latin America. One of the first things we noted was the absence of military rulers whose family names were also the names of "buenas familias," or the propertied aristocracy. By doing a representative series of biographical studies, we found, almost invariably, that the military elites were men of relatively humble social origins; that they were almost never sons of the land barons. And so, we now know that the upper-class leaders of the early nineteenth-century revolutionary wars against Spain retired from the political scene soon after independence was achieved. Not only did the upper classes not relish risking their lives in the crude jungle of politics, but also they had little taste for the hard, dull, routine life of the barracks, and hence they retired to their landed estates.

And thus into leadership of the new national armies rose undisciplined amateur soldiers, schooled only in the violence of the long and bloody revolutionary struggles—men decidedly of a lower order,

both socially and intellectually, than the leaders of the revolution. For such men, an army career provided the opportunity to break through the arbitrary restrictions of the old social order, in effect, to shoot one's way into a share of the power, wealth, and prestige enjoyed by the aristocracy.

The officer corps possessed little or no concept of the military career as a legitimate profession. The point here is that the so-called military elites were little more than hordes of heavily armed politicians during Latin America's first half-century of independence. The plethora of ambitious, opportunistic military men left over from the Wars of Independence made politics, in nearly every country, little more than a series of internecine military convulsions. The struggle always centered around two buildings: the presidential palace and the national treasury. Once in power, a military president would take advantage of the opportunity to feather his own nest, paying off his backers with the residue. However, the victorious forces seldom had sufficient resources to distribute spoils to everyone, and so the disgruntled would sow the seeds of a new military conspiracy. Thus a vicious cycle of revolution developed. The "out" groups would never rest until they had seized the presidential palace and the national treasury. Then would come the inevitable redistribution of offices, honors, privileges, and spoils, all of which would last only until the next successful revolt.

The revolutions which occurred in Latin America in this period were not mass movements, for the combatants were limited to rival military chieftains and their adherents. Often in the background, members of the landed oligarchy, or wealthy commercial groups, or the Church hierarchy, would engage in political intrigue with one or another military faction, but the overwhelming majority of the population was not affected. The so-called revolutions of the nineteenth century, then, were merely palace coups, fights for the spoils within the officer corps. When a revolt succeeded, the top government personnel would be supplanted, but for the masses, all that occurred was a change of masters.

Political control by the military elites did not disturb the economic and social dominance of the landed and commercial oligarchy. For with the great majority of the population inarticulate, poverty-stricken, and politically apathetic, the military rulers were under no popular pressure to alter the existing social system, nor did they show any inclination to do so. Throughout the nineteenth century, the military

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elites indeed aspired to upper-class status, ever attempting to use their political offices to amass fortunes and become landowners themselves. But the more important consideration here is that they accommodated themselves to the semifeudal system the new nations had inherited from the Spanish colonial past. In this generally static social milieu, the military politicians were about the only ones for whom upward social mobility was possible.

DECLINE OF MILITARISM

Now, just as in the case of the origins and meaning of Latin American militarism, historians have made some pretty unsatisfactory interpretations concerning the decline of militarism in the second half-century of Latin America's independence, namely, the period 1880-1930. To explain why militarism began to die out in the major countries in this period, the antimilitary intellectuals used to explain that the military elites had simply destroyed themselves in internecine warfare and that their outrageous excesses—such as their political mismanagement, their peculation, and the like—would simply no longer be tolerated by the civilians. More sophisticated was the interpretation of the Spencerian school of Latin American historians—scholars who began to believe in evolutionary laws of history, scholars who then went on to explain that the transition from military to civilian rule was an inevitable and universal historical process. A typical example of this kind of interpretation is found in the work of Peruvian historian Francisco García Calderón who, on the eve of World War I, wrote:

> Inevitably we find the sequence of two periods, one military and one industrial or civil. Independence once realized, the rule of militarism sets in throughout [Latin America]. After a period of uncertain duration the military caste is hurled from power, or abdicates without violence, and economic interests become supreme. Politics is then ruled by "civilism."*

Now this statement describes what happened, but it doesn't tell us very much about why and how. We don't have all the answers yet,

* F. García Calderón, *Latin America: Its Rise and Progress* (London: Fischer Unwin, 1913), p. 86.

but we feel we are arriving at something very significant in analyzing the tremendous European and United States impact upon Latin America in the period 1880-1930, and then relating these new foreign influences to the decline of militarism. Perhaps the principal consequence of Western industrial modernizing influences upon underdeveloped areas today is the drastic alteration—sometimes even destruction—of native cultures, folkways, traditions, and institutions. In Latin America this heavy Occidental modernizing impact first hit the area with force in the period 1880-1930. This was the great period of European immigration—principally Italian, Spanish, German, and Portuguese—and also, this was the great period of foreign investment and technological development—principally British, United States, and French. In those countries where European immigrants, Western technology, and foreign capital flowed in, we see a decline in militarism—in Chile in the 1840's, in Argentina after 1860, in Colombia at the turn of the century. And in Mexico, certainly, there is a relationship between foreign-financed economic development and the disciplining, for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, of that country's armed forces. And in Brazil, this modernizing Occidental impact (immigrants, technology, and capital) did much to bring about the collapse of the Empire in 1889, and, following a five-year military interlude, the establishment of orderly republican government. Conversely, in those countries where the impact of European immigration and Western technology was minimal until the twentieth century, such as in Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Ecuador, militarism continued.

Another consequence of foreign influence, which in turn helps explain the decline of militarism in the 1880-1930 era, was the growth and development of professionalism inside Latin America's armed forces. Professionalism meant that the officer corps turned its energies toward the exercising of military rather than political functions, toward maintaining internal security and preparing for defense against external aggression. And in this process, the Latin American military elites began to become the tools rather than the masters of the state. Again, despite the importance of this phenomenon of professionalism —for it was the very antithesis of militarism—historians and political scientists ignored it until very recently. We know now that this professionalism stimulus also came out of Western Europe, that it was part of the general Occidental impact upon Latin America in the 1880-1930 period. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, French

and German military missions began introducing modern military methods and developing professional pride and esprit. The Germans came to train the Chilean army in 1885 and the Argentine army before the end of the century, and French officers carried out similar tasks in Brazil and Peru around the turn of the century. We have found evidence of burgeoning professionalism in all the major Latin American countries by the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas a quarter-century earlier it was nonexistent.

What did professionalism mean? It meant that Latin America's armed forces were being converted from political institutions into military institutions. And the gradual elevation of the career of arms into a respectable profession also meant that there were attracted to it more responsible, patriotic, and dedicated types. Just as in the past, the new cadets were drawn from the nonpropertied classes, but increasingly, technical proficiency and devoted patriotic service, rather than political adventurism, were rewarded in a military career. Increasingly, then, we see in this period the military academies of the more advanced countries becoming filled with the serious, responsible sons of urban professional and small business families, and the growth of these truly professional armies served to reinforce the political calm that began to prevail in Latin America around the turn of the century. It lasted until 1930.

RESURGENCE OF MILITARISM

Then suddenly in 1930, a new wave of military intervention swept the Latin American republics, and for the past thirty-five years the political arena in virtually the whole area has become one in which civilian and military contestants have been fighting for control. What explains the sudden resurgence of militarism in 1930 just when Latin America seemed on the verge of solving this problem? The precipitating factor is clear enough—namely, the great world depression, which hit Latin America particularly hard and buckled the fiscal foundations and public support of civilian governments throughout the area. As a consequence, over half the governments of Latin America were seized by the armed forces.

Until recently, scholars have not only been confused over the issue of military motivation for political intervention but also they have failed to understand the political role the military have been playing.

Indignant antimilitary historians have again allowed their hostility to interfere with objective appraisals and judgments. The most common practice has been to explain the post-1930 military intervention as a simple reversion of armed-forces officers to the crude praetorianism and vicious irresponsibility of the past—that is, that the always power-hungry military, which had been biding their time for years, took advantage of the opportunity, when civilian governments were temporarily weakened by the shock of the great world depression, to seize power again, and ever since the officers have been unwilling to relinquish political power.

Our investigations of the past decade, however, have resulted in quite a different interpretation. What we have done is to place the whole problem of military intervention in Latin America since 1930 in the broad context of the social reform problem. I believe it can be demonstrated, the Mexican exception aside, that the first time a really serious social crisis hit Latin America was the depression year 1930, and that the struggle to resolve it has been going on ever since. The deep military involvement in this social struggle is the key to an explanation of armed-forces officers' political actions over the past thirty-five years.

Now of course there is still to be explained the sudden eruption of the sociopolitical crisis in 1930. Although in the period 1880-1930 economic development and political progress took place, the traditional social order was not seriously disturbed. But with immigration, foreign investment, and the technological advances, which gave stimulus to material progress and rapid urbanization, new social forces, such as organized labor and various middle-class groupings, were beginning to emerge. These had not made sufficient headway to disturb seriously the socioeconomic dominance of the landed and commercial oligarchy —until the economic hardships of world depression brought sudden demands from the lower-income groups for an improvement in their lot, demands expressed in the form of strikes, riots, and ugly mob demonstrations.

The initial response of the military to this pressure for social reforms from popular elements was to set up military governments and preserve order by use of force. True, this resurgence of militarism was encouraged by the frightened oligarchy. But the military were even more frightened for themselves. If public order broke down and a social upheaval occurred, then the armed-forces institution itself would be destroyed, just as it was in Mexico a decade and a half earlier. Thus

it was really to save their own skins that the officers seized political power. When the depression hit at the beginning of 1930, rightist military dictatorships were already in power in Cuba and Venezuela, and during the ensuing two years, eight more such regimes were installed. This rightist-authorization political pattern generally prevailed in Latin America until the end of World War II.

When the war broke out in Western Europe in 1939, more than half of Latin America's twenty republics were ruled by conservative military men, and in most of those countries where the armed forces were not ruling directly, they were backing traditionalist civilian regimes. The net effect of World War II upon Latin American politics was to freeze traditionalist regimes in power so long as the security of the hemisphere was threatened. The wartime emergency provided authorization regimes with justification for outlawing political experimentation and major social or economic reforms for the duration. Also, the United States, whose overriding concern was strategic, did its best to maintain stability in Latin America, sought the cooperation of all governments which were willing to aid the war effort, and provided them with substantial military and economic aid.

And yet the war produced pressures which made maintenance of the social status quo progressively more difficult. For one thing, the outbreak of hostilities seriously disturbed Latin America's economy. The immediate shock, due to the transportation squeeze, was felt in shortages, particularly of manufactured goods, but also of foodstuffs. The sudden interruption of imports from Western Europe and the United States gave a great new impetus to industrialization, but the new wartime prosperity was not broadly based. Governments froze wages, prohibited strikes, even outlawed labor movements in some countries. Thus the hardships suffered by the lower- and middle-income groups intensified to the point where social stresses and strains reached the breaking point.

Then an unexpected and unprecedented thing occurred. In country after country, toward the end of World War II, radical young officers seized control of armed-forces organizations; then they made common cause with popular elements, overthrew traditionalist regimes, and brought reform governments into power. The first such revolution was led by Colonel Juan Perón in Argentina in June of 1943. Later that same year, young officers in Bolivia conducted a similar kind of revolution. During 1944 popular revolutions led by young officers occurred in Ecuador and Guatemala, and the same thing occurred in

The Twelfth Annual U.N.M. Research Lecture

DR. EDWIN LIEUWEN, Chairman of the department of history at the University, delivered the Twelfth Annual Research Lecture on April 2, 1965. He is known for his success in building programs of specialized excellence in the history, language and culture of Latin America.

Born in South Dakota, where he received his elementary and secondary education, he was awarded his baccalaureate and doctoral degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. For three years during World War II, he was a Navy lieutenant and, after serving as an instructor on the University of California at Los Angeles history faculty, he became Visiting Professor of American History at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. He then returned to the University of California at Berkeley where he taught Latin American History before entering government service as a Staff Chief for Latin American Affairs. Since 1957 he has been a member and chairman of the history faculty at UNM.

As a scholar whose principal contributions have been in the field of historical research on Latin American military institutions and as an authority on Venezuela, he has published six books and more than twenty articles. He has been the recipient of several research grants and has been awarded fellowships by the University of California, the Doherty Foundation, the Organization of American States, the Fulbright Commission, the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

In addition to serving on many university committees, he has been a consultant to the State and Defense Departments, to several private research organizations, and is a member of the American Historical Association, Hispanic-American Historical Association and the Netherlands-American Foundation.

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Venezuela in 1945. By 1953, reform-minded elements, either led by the military or supported by them, took control in twelve of Latin America's twenty countries. Thus, we see the armed forces making a determined effort to promote social reform. They clearly demonstrated, then, in the decade 1943-1953, that they were something more than the mere agents of the oligarchy.

But then just as suddenly, as the wave of political change and social reform seemed to be carrying all before it, the political currents began to flow in the opposite direction, that is, there was counter-revolution, led by the military again, and reaction. In fact, in the decade 1948-1958, which overlapped the military-reform decade of 1943-1953, every single government of the reformist type was either overturned or forced to adopt a much more moderate course. Generally speaking, the armed forces unmade the very revolutions they had launched in the immediate post-World War II period. Why? Well, riding the breast of social reform proved to be a much more difficult job than the military rulers had anticipated. Pressures from the oligarchy and the frightened upper-middle class against any further leftward evolution threatened to bring about a breakdown of law and order. Reformist elements seemed to be trying to move too fast, too soon, to deliberately widen social cleavages and provoke violence. The lower-income groups, encouraged by demagogic governments, seemed to be getting out of hand. Then too, the late 1940's witnessed the coming of the Cold War to Latin America, and the Korean crisis of the early 1950's made the Cold War even more intense. In the eyes of the armed forces, the new international crisis called for political stability and a moratorium on the unsettling business of social reform.

In the late 1950's, as traditionalist or more moderate regimes were restored to power, the military rulers once more withdrew from the scene. Four of them were actually assassinated (Colonel Remón in Panama in 1955, General Somoza in Nicaragua in 1956, Colonel Castillo Armas in Guatemala in 1957, and General Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 1961) and two were driven from power (Perez Jiménez in Venezuela in 1958, and Batista in Cuba in 1959) by the aroused populace.

However, Latin America is once more in the midst of resurgent military rule today. In the past three years, eight duly elected civilian governments have been overthrown by the armed forces. In Argentina, on March 30, 1962, they deposed President Arturo Frondizi and dismissed Congress because they disapproved of election results which

gave the followers of Perón too much power. Three months later, the military assumed power in Peru because they too disapproved of election results, results which gave reform candidate Haya de la Torre a plurality in the presidential race. They then ruled through a military junta for a full year until a president more acceptable to the armed forces was elected by the Peruvian people. During 1963, four more constitutional presidents were displaced by the use of military force—in Guatemala, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. In April of 1964, Latin America's largest country, Brazil, came under military rule, and in November of 1964, the Bolivian vice-president, a general, forced the civilian president out of the country and assumed power himself.

THE MEANING OF CONTEMPORARY MILITARISM

WITH THIS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, we are now in a position to understand better the meaning of military intervention in contemporary Latin America. Certainly it is clear that political intervention by the armed forces in Latin America today is something more than crude praetorianism. The generals who seize power today are no longer the capricious ogres of the past, whose only interest seemed to be in destroying civilian government and raiding the national treasury. On the contrary, the military are generally motivated by what they believe to be sincere patriotism. Their intervention, they believe, is always in the national interest—to save their country or to protect the armed-forces institution, which they believe to be the very embodiment of nationhood.

Normally, the armed forces will support the duly elected civilian government, but the moment the situation departs from what they view as normal, they begin to reexamine their position. If public order threatens to break down as a result of growing opposition to the policies of the incumbent government, then the military feel a constitutional duty to intervene, usually only temporarily, to provide the nation with a more viable administration. The armed forces always disclaim any desire to exercise power themselves; they wish only to guarantee that the civilians who exercise it are doing it properly in the true national interest and are not perverting their functions.

Why are the military so active in Latin American politics today? Why have they seen fit to depose eight civilian governments over the

past three years? The explanation, I believe, lies in the military reaction to a sudden new intensification of the social crisis. The latter has been provoked by two explosive new ingredients which have been pumped into the Latin American political vortex in just the past six years. One is the Castro-Communist revolution in Cuba which began in 1959, and the other is the United States Alliance for Progress program, which President Kennedy launched in 1961.

Consider first Castro's Cuba. The spectacle of Castro's utter destruction of Batista's armed force and his summary execution of most of the senior officers in Cuba (more than six hundred of them) filled the hearts of their professional brethren in the other countries of Latin America with horror and apprehension. They recall today that Castro started out as a moderate reformer, but that he surprised nearly everyone with the violence and extremism that characterized the immediate aftermath of his victory. As a result, military men in Latin America today have come to suspect any popular reform movement as a potential threat to their own lives and institutions.

A further cause for the armed forces' apprehension over their own future is—strange as this may seem—the United States' formula for stopping Castroism in Latin America—namely, the Alliance for Progress. In the eyes of the Latin American military, the United States government's public advocacy of, and support for crash programs of material development and social change conducted through the medium of authentically democratic governments is tantamount to encouraging political chaos and social disintegration. What the officers fear is that the Alliance may provoke a violent social upheaval in which the military will be destroyed as they were in Cuba. And that is why they are intervening in politics today. They do not necessarily oppose social reform, but they insist that it be conducted at a pace moderate enough to avoid the threat of social revolution.

Although the military intervenors have now retired from the political scene in two countries and are making preparations to do so in the other six, all eight interventions of the past three years have had profound political and social consequences upon the nations involved. One obvious political result is a blow against democracy, for in every single case, the successor regime that emanated, or will emanate, from the military junta's interim rule is inevitably less representative than the government it deposed. Whatever has emerged, or may emerge in the way of new elections, new constitutions, and new governments may be called democracy, but the military's veto against the return

of the majority elements they ousted makes a mockery of that word. A likely secondary political consequence of the military interventions will be more military interventions, for the intervenors must now protect themselves against possible vengeance from resurgent democratic forces.

But even more serious than the political consequences are the social ones. For these eight military coups meant something far more than the mere ouster of eight popularly elected presidents. More fundamentally, they meant the strengthening of social reaction. Even though the military did not act at the behest of the propertied elite, their actions, all the same, have had the effect of halting, or at least stalling, broad programs of social reform advocated by the governments they deposed, or by the governments they prevented from taking power. Thus it is the oligarchies that have reaped the benefits, at least temporarily, from the military coups. This social consequence of military intervention, I believe, raises a serious threat, both immediate and long-range, to the success of the Alliance for Progress program, and makes it more likely than ever that more violent revolutions of the Cuban variety may well plague the Latin American area—and create new headaches for the United States government—in the future.