

THE EMPIRE AND THE INDEPENDENT ISLAND. Part III

The Formal Repeal of the Platt Amendment and Continued Presence of the Guantanamo Naval Base.

The advent of the Democratic administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the United States in 1933 opened the way to a necessary accommodation of the relationship of domination that the U.S. exercised over Cuba. The fall of the Gerardo Machado's tyranny under the pressure of a powerful popular movement, and the subsequent installation of a provisional government headed by the university professor of physiology, Ramón Grau San Martín, were a serious obstacle to the achievement of the program demanded by the people.

On November 24, 1933, U.S. President Roosevelt issued an official statement encouraging the intrigues of Batista and Sumner Welles, the Ambassador to Havana, against Grau's government. These included the offer to sign a new commercial treaty and repeal the Platt Amendment. Roosevelt explained that "...any Provisional Government in Cuba in which the Cuban people show their confidence would be welcome". The impatience of the U.S. administration to get rid of Grau was growing, as from mid-November the influence of a young anti-imperialist, Antonio Guiteras, was increasing in the government, which would take many of its more radical steps in the weeks to come. It was necessary to swiftly overthrow that government.

On December 13, 1933, Ambassador Sumner Welles returned definitively to Washington and was substituted five days later by Jefferson Caffery.

On January 13-14, 1934, Batista convened and presided over a military meeting at Columbia, where he proposed to oust Grau and appoint Colonel Carlos Mendieta y Montefur, which was agreed to by the so-called Columbia Military Junta. Grau San Martín presented his resignation at dawn on January 15, 1934 and left for exile in Mexico on the 20th of the same month. Thus, on January 18, 1934, Mendieta was installed as President after the coup d'état. Although the Mendieta administration had been recognized by the United States on January 23rd of that year, actually the fate of the country was in the hands of Ambassador Caffery and Batista.

The overthrow of the Grau San Martín provisional government in January 1934, as a result of internal contradictions and a whole series of pressures, maneuvers and aggressions wielded against it by imperialism and its local allies, meant a first and indispensable step towards the imposition of an oligarchic-imperialistic alternative to solve the Cuban national crisis.

The government headed by Mendieta would take on the task of adjusting the bonds of the country's neo-colonial dependency.

Neither the oligarchy reinstated in power, nor the Washington government, were in position to ignore the feelings of the Cuban people towards neocolonialism and its instruments. Nor was the United States unaware of the importance of the support of Latin American governments -Cuba among them- in the already foreseeable confrontation with other emerging imperialist powers such as Germany and Japan.

The new process would include formulae to ensure the renewed functioning of the neocolonial system. The "Good Neighbor" policy was very mindful of Latin American opposition to Washington's open interventionism in the hemisphere. The aim of Roosevelt's policy was to portray a new image in its hemispheric relations through the "good neighbor" diplomatic formula.

As one of the adjustment measures, on May 29, 1934 a new U.S.-Cuba Relations Treaty, modifying the one of May 22, 1903, was signed by the other Roosevelt, perhaps a distant relative of the one who had landed in Cuba with the Rough Riders.

Two days earlier, on May 27, at 10:30 a.m., when United States Ambassador Jefferson Caffery was getting ready, as was his custom, to leave his residence in the Alturas de Almendares, he was the target of an assassination attempt; three shots were fired by several unidentified individuals from a car. The next day, May 28th, at noon, as it was driving along Quinta Avenida in the Miramar district, the car assigned to the First Secretary of the United States Embassy, H. Freeman Matthews, after having dropped off the diplomat at the Embassy, was attacked by several individuals traveling in a car and armed with machine guns. One of them approached the chauffeur and told him that he should let Matthews know that he was giving him one week to get out of Cuba: then he smashed the windshield of the car and sped off.

These acts that revealed a general climate of anti-United States hostility could have precipitated the signing of the new Relations Treaty that proposed the alleged end of the unpopular Platt Amendment.

The new Relations Treaty provided for the suppression of the right of the United States to intervene in Cuba and that:

“The United States of America and the Republic of Cuba, being animated by the desire to fortify the relations of friendship between the two countries and to modify, with this purpose, the relations established between them by the Treaty of Relations signed in Havana, May 22, 1903, (...) have agreed upon the following articles:

(...)

“Article 3.- Until the two contracting parties agree to the modifications or abrogation of the stipulations of the agreement in regard to the lease to the United States of America of lands in Cuba for coaling and naval stations signed by the President of the Republic of Cuba on February 16, 1903, and by the President of the United States of America on the 23rd day of the same month and year, the stipulations of that agreement with regard to the naval stations of Guantanamo shall continue in effect in the same form and conditions with respect to the naval station at Guantanamo. So long as the United States of America shall not abandon the said naval station of Guantanamo or the two Governments shall not agree to a modification of its present limits, the station shall continue to have territorial area that it now has, with the limits that it has on the date of the signature of the present Treaty.”

The United States Senate ratified the new Relations Treaty on June 1, 1934, and Cuba on June 4. Five days later, on June 9, ratifications of the Relations Treaty of May 29th of the same year were exchanged, and with that the Platt Amendment was formally repealed, but the Guantanamo Naval Base remained.

The new Treaty legalized the de facto situation of the Guantanamo naval station, thus rescinding the part of the agreements of February 16 and 23 and July 2 of 1903 between the two countries relating to the lands and waters in Bahia Honda, and the part that referred to the waters and lands of the Guantanamo station was amended, in the sense that they were enlarged.

The United States maintained its naval station in Guantanamo as a strategic surveillance and control site, in order to ensure its political and economic predominance in the Caribbean and Central America and to defend the Panama Canal.

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