

## CHAPTER VIII

### “ON THE MARGIN OF INTERNATIONAL LIFE”

DURING the period from 1889 to 1907 two incidents revealed the standing that the republics of Hispanic America had now acquired in the world at large. In 1889 at Washington, and later in their own capital cities, they met with the United States in council. In 1899, and again in 1907, they joined their great northern neighbor and the nations of Europe and Asia at The Hague for deliberation on mutual concerns, and they were admitted to an international fellowship and coöperation far beyond a mere recognition of their independence and a formal interchange of diplomats and consuls.

Since attempts of the Hispanic countries themselves to realize the aims of Bolívar in calling the Congress at Panamá had failed, the United States now undertook to call into existence a sort of inter-American Congress. Instead of being merely a

supporter, the great republic of the north had resolved to become the director of the movement for greater solidarity in thought and action. By linking up the concerns of the Hispanic nations with its own destinies it would assert not so much its position as guardian of the Monroe Doctrine as its headship, if not its actual dominance, in the New World, and would so widen the bounds of its political and commercial influence — a tendency known as “imperialism.” Such was the way, at least, in which the Hispanic republics came to view the action of the “Colossus of the North” in inviting them to participate in an assemblage meeting more or less periodically and termed officially the “International Conference of American States,” and popularly the “Pan-American Conference.”

Whether the mistrust the smaller countries felt at the outset was lessened in any degree by the attendance of their delegates at the sessions of this conference remains open to question. Although these representatives, in common with their colleagues from the United States, assented to a variety of conventions and passed a much larger number of resolutions, their acquiescence seemed due to a desire to gratify their powerful associate, rather than to a belief in the possible utility of such

measures. The experience of the earlier gatherings had demonstrated that political issues would have to be excluded from consideration. Propositions, for example, such as that to extend the basic idea of the Monroe Doctrine into a sort of self-denying ordinance, under which all the nations of America should agree to abstain thereafter from acquiring any part of one another's territory by conquest, and to adopt, also, the principle of compulsory arbitration, proved impossible of acceptance. Accordingly, from that time onward the matters treated by the Conference dealt for the most part with innocuous, though often praiseworthy, projects for bringing the United States and its sister republics into closer commercial, industrial, and intellectual relations.

The gathering itself, on the other hand, became to a large extent a *fiesta*, a festive occasion for the display of social amenities. Much as the Hispanic Americans missed their favorite topic of politics, they found consolation in entertaining the distinguished foreign visitors with the genial courtesy and generous hospitality for which they are famous. As one of their periodicals later expressed it, since a discussion of politics was tabooed, it were better to devote the sessions of the Conference

to talking about music and lyric poetry! At all events, as far as the outcome was concerned, their national legislatures ratified comparatively few of the conventions.

Among the Hispanic nations of America only Mexico took part in the First Conference at The Hague. Practically all of them were represented at the second. The appearance of their delegates at these august assemblages of the powers of earth was viewed for a while with mixed feelings. The attitude of the Great Powers towards them resembled that of parents of the old régime: children at the international table should be "seen and not heard." As a matter of fact, the Hispanic Americans were both seen and heard — especially the latter! They were able to show the Europeans that, even if they did happen to come from relatively weak states, they possessed a skillful intelligence, a breadth of knowledge, a capacity for expression, and a consciousness of national character, which would not allow them simply to play "Man Friday" to an international Crusoe. The president of the second conference, indeed, confessed that they had been a "revelation" to him.

Hence, as time went on, the progress and possibilities of the republics of Hispanic America came

to be appreciated more and more by the world at large. Gradually people began to realize that the countries south of the United States were not merely an indistinguishable block on the map, to be referred to vaguely as "Central and South America" or as "Latin America." The reading public at least knew that these countries were quite different from one another, both in achievements and in prospects.

Yet the fact remains that, despite their active part in these American and European conferences, the Hispanic countries of the New World did not receive the recognition which they felt was their due. Their national associates in the European gatherings were disinclined to admit that the possession of independence and sovereignty entitled them to equal representation on international council boards. To a greater or less degree, therefore, they continued to stay in the borderland where no one either affirmed or denied their individuality. To quote the phrase of an Hispanic American, they stood "on the margin of international life." How far they might pass beyond it into the full privileges of recognition and association on equal terms, would depend upon the readiness with which they could atone for the errors

or recover from the misfortunes of the past, and upon their power to attain stability, prosperity, strength, and responsibility.

Certain of the Hispanic republics, however, were not allowed to remain alone on their side of "the margin of international life." Though nothing so extreme as the earlier French intervention took place, foreign nations were not at all averse to crossing over the marginal line and teaching them what a failure to comply with international obligations meant. The period from 1889 to 1907, therefore, is characterized also by interference on the part of European powers, and by interposition on the part of the United States, in the affairs of countries in and around the Caribbean Sea. Because of the action taken by the United States two more republics — Cuba and Panamá — came into being, thus increasing the number of political offshoots from Spain in America to eighteen. Another result of this interposition was the creation of what were substantially American protectorates. Here the United States did not deprive the countries concerned of their independence and sovereignty, but subjected them to a kind of guardianship or tutelage, so far as it thought needful to insure stability, solvency, health, and welfare in general.

Foremost in the northern group of Hispanic nations, Mexico, under the guidance of Díaz, marched steadily onward. Peace, order, and law; an increasing population; internal wealth and well-being; a flourishing industry and commerce; suitable care for things mental as well as material; the respect and confidence of foreigners — these were blessings which the country had hitherto never beheld. The Mexicans, once in anarchy and enmity created by militarists and clericals, came to know one another in friendship, and arrived at something like a national consciousness.

In 1889 there was held the first conference on educational problems which the republic had ever had. Three years later a mining code was drawn up which made ownership inviolable on payment of lawful dues, removed uncertainties of operation, and stimulated the industry in a remarkable fashion. Far less beneficial in the long run was a law enacted in 1894. Instead of granting a legal title to lands held by prescriptive rights through an occupation of many years, it made such property part of the public domain, which might be acquired, like a mining claim, by any one who could secure a grant of it from the Government. Though hailed at the time as a piece of constructive

legislation, its unfortunate effect was to enable large landowners who wished to increase their possessions to oust poor cultivators of the soil from their humble holdings. On the other hand, under the statesmanlike management of José Yves Limantour, the Minister of Finance, the monetary situation at home and abroad was strengthened beyond measure, and banking interests were promoted accordingly. Further, an act abolishing the *alcabala*, a vexatious internal revenue tax, gave a great stimulus to freedom of commerce throughout the country. In order to insure a continuance of the new régime, the constitution was altered in three important respects. The amendment of 1890 restored the original clause of 1857, which permitted indefinite reelection to the presidency; that of 1896 established a presidential succession in case of a vacancy, beginning with the Minister of Foreign Affairs; and that of 1904 lengthened the term of the chief magistrate from four years to six and created the office of Vice President.

In Central America two republics, Guatemala and Costa Rica, set an excellent example both because they were free from internal commotions and because they refrained from interference in the affairs of their neighbors. The contrast between these

two quiet little nations, under their lawyer Presidents, and the bellicose but equally small Nicaragua, Honduras, and Salvador, under their chieftains, military and juristic, was quite remarkable. Nevertheless another attempt at confederation was made. In 1895 the ruler of Honduras, declaring that reunion was a "primordial necessity," invited his fellow potentates of Nicaragua and Salvador to unite in creating the "Greater Republic of Central America" and asked Guatemala and Costa Rica to join. Delegates actually appeared from all five republics, attended *fiestas*, gave expression to pious wishes, and went home! Later still, in 1902, the respective Presidents signed a "convention of peace and obligatory arbitration" as a means of adjusting perpetual disagreements about politics and boundaries; but nothing was done to carry these ideas into effect.

The personage mainly responsible for these failures was José Santos Zelaya, one of the most arrant military lordlets and meddlers that Central America had produced in a long time. Since 1893 he had been dictator of Nicaragua, a country not only entangled in continuous wrangles among its towns and factions, but bowed under an enormous burden of debt created by excessive emissions of

paper money and by the contraction of more or less scandalous foreign loans. Quite undisturbed by the financial situation, Zelaya promptly silenced local bickerings and devoted his energies to altering the constitution for his presidential benefit and to making trouble for his neighbors. Nor did he refrain from displays of arbitrary conduct that were sure to provoke foreign intervention. Great Britain, for example, on two occasions exacted reparation at the cannon's mouth for ill treatment of its citizens.

Zelaya waxed wroth at the spectacle of Guatemala, once so active in revolutionary arts but now quietly minding its own business. In 1906, therefore, along with parties of Hondurans, Salvadoreans, and disaffected Guatemalans, he began an invasion of that country and continued operations with decreasing success until, the United States and Mexico offering their mediation, peace was signed aboard an American cruiser. Then, when Costa Rica invited the other republics to discuss confederation within its calm frontiers, Zelaya preferred his own particular occupation to any such procedure. Accordingly, displeased with a recent boundary decision, he started along with Salvador to fight Honduras. Once more the United States

and Mexico tendered their good offices, and again a Central American conflict was closed aboard an American warship. About the only real achievement of Zelaya was the signing of a treaty by which Great Britain recognized the complete sovereignty of Nicaragua over the Mosquito Indians, whose buzzing for a larger amount of freedom and more tribute had been disturbing unduly the "repose" of that small nation!

To the eastward the new republic of Cuba was about to be born. Here a promise of adequate representation in the Spanish Cortes and of a local legislature had failed to satisfy the aspirations of many of its inhabitants. The discontent was aggravated by lax and corrupt methods of administration as well as by financial difficulties. Swarms of Spanish officials enjoyed large salaries without performing duties of equivalent value. Not a few of them had come over to enrich themselves at public expense and under conditions altogether scandalous. On Cuba, furthermore, was saddled the debt incurred by the Ten Years' War, while the island continued to be a lucrative market for Spanish goods without obtaining from Spain a corresponding advantage for its own products.

As the insistence upon a removal of these abuses

and upon a grant of genuine self-government became steadily more clamorous, three political groups appeared. The Constitutional Unionists, or "Austrianizers," as they were dubbed because of their avowed loyalty to the royal house of Bourbon-Hapsburg, were made up of the Spanish and conservative elements and represented the large economic interests and the Church. The Liberals, or "Autonomists," desired such reforms in the administration as would assure the exercise of self-government and yet preserve the bond with the mother country. On the other hand, the Radicals, or "Nationalists" — the party of "Cuba Free" — would be satisfied with nothing short of absolute independence. All these differences of opinion were sharpened by the activities of a sensational press.

From about 1890 onward the movement toward independence gathered tremendous strength, especially when the Cubans found popular sentiment in the United States so favorable to it. Excitement rose still higher when the Spanish Government proposed to bestow a larger measure of autonomy. When, however, the Cortes decided upon less liberal arrangements, the Autonomists declared that they had been deceived, and the

Nationalists denounced the utter unreliability of Spanish promises. Even if the concessions had been generous, the result probably would have been the same, for by this time the plot to set Cuba free had become so widespread, both in the island itself and among the refugees in the United States, that the inevitable struggle could not have been deferred.

In 1895 the revolution broke out. The whites, headed by Máximo Gómez, and the negroes and mulattoes by their chieftain, Antonio Macéo, both of whom had done valiant service in the earlier war, started upon a campaign of deliberate terrorism. This time they were resolved to win at any cost. Spurning every offer of conciliation, they burned, ravaged, and laid waste, spread desolation along their pathway, and reduced thousands to abject poverty and want.

Then the Spanish Government came to the conclusion that nothing but the most rigorous sort of reprisals would check the excesses of the rebels. In 1896 it commissioned Valeriano Weyler, an officer who personified ferocity, to put down the rebellion. If the insurgents had fancied that the conciliatory spirit hitherto displayed by the Spaniards was due to irresolution or weakness, they

found that these were not the qualities of their new opponent. Weyler, instead of trying to suppress the rebellion by hurrying detachments of troops first to one spot and then to another in pursuit of enemies accustomed to guerrilla tactics, determined to stamp it out province by province. To this end he planted his army firmly in one particular area, prohibited the planting or harvesting of crops there, and ordered the inhabitants to assemble in camps which they were not permitted to leave on any pretext whatever. This was his policy of "reconcentration." Deficient food supply, lack of sanitary precautions, and absence of moral safeguards made conditions of life in these camps appalling. Death was a welcome relief. Reconcentration, combined with executions and deportations, could have but one result—the "pacification" of Cuba by converting it into a desert.

Not in the United States alone but in Spain itself the story of these drastic measures kindled popular indignation to such an extent that, in 1897, the Government was forced to recall the ferocious Weyler and to send over a new Governor and Captain General, with instructions to abandon the worst features of his predecessor's policy and to establish a complete system of autonomy in both

Cuba and Porto Rico. Feeling assured, however, that an ally was at hand who would soon make their independence certain, the Cuban patriots flatly rejected these overtures. In their expectations they were not mistaken. By its armed intervention, in the following year the United States acquired Porto Rico for itself and compelled Spain to withdraw from Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

The island then became a republic, subject only to such limitations on its freedom of action as its big guardian might see fit to impose. Not only was Cuba placed under American rule from 1899 to 1902, but it had to insert in the Constitution of 1901 certain clauses that could not fail to be galling to Cuban pride. Among them two were of special significance. One imposed limitations on the financial powers of the Government of the new nation, and the other authorized the United States, at its discretion, to intervene in Cuban affairs for the purpose of maintaining public order. The Cubans, it would seem, had exchanged a dependence on Spain for a restricted independence measured by the will of a country infinitely stronger.

Cuba began its life as a republic in 1902, under

<sup>1</sup> See *The Path of Empire*, by Carl Russell Fish (in *The Chronicles of America*).

a government for which a form both unitary and federal had been provided. Tomás Estrada Palma, the first President and long the head of the Cuban junta in the United States, showed himself disposed from the outset to continue the beneficial reforms in administration which had been introduced under American rule. Prudent and conciliatory in temperament, he tried to dispel as best he could the bitter recollections of the war and to repair its ravages. In this policy he was upheld by the conservative class, or Moderates. Their opponents, the Liberals, dominated by men of radical tendencies, were eager to assert the right, to which they thought Cuba entitled as an independent sovereign nation, to make possible mistakes and correct them without having the United States forever holding the ferule of the schoolmaster over it. They were well aware, however, that they were not at liberty to have their country pass through the tempestuous experience which had been the lot of so many Hispanic republics. They could vent a natural anger and disappointment, nevertheless, on the President and his supporters. Rather than continue to be governed by Cubans not to their liking, they were willing to bring about a renewal of American rule.

In this respect the wishes of the Radicals were soon gratified. Hardly had Estrada Palma, in 1906, assumed office for a second time, when parties of malcontents, declaring that he had secured his reelection by fraudulent means, rose up in arms and demanded that he annul the vote and hold a fair election. The President accepted the challenge and waged a futile conflict, and again the United States intervened. Upon the resignation of Estrada Palma, an American Governor was again installed, and Cuba was told in unmistakable fashion that the next intervention might be permanent.

Less drastic but quite as effectual a method of assuring order and regularity in administration was the action taken by the United States in another Caribbean island. A little country like the Dominican Republic, in which few Presidents managed to retain their offices for terms fixed by changeable constitutions, could not resist the temptation to rid itself of a ruler who had held power for nearly a quarter of a century. After he had been disposed of by assassination in 1899, the government of his successor undertook to repudiate a depreciated paper currency by ordering the customs duties to be paid in specie; and it also tried to prevent the consul of an aggrieved foreign nation from attaching

certain revenues as security for the payment of the arrears of an indemnity. Thereupon, in 1905, the President of the United States entered into an arrangement with the Dominican Government whereby, in return for a pledge from the former country to guarantee the territorial integrity of the republic and an agreement to adjust all of its external obligations of a pecuniary sort, American officials were to take charge of the custom house and apportion the receipts from that source in such a manner as to satisfy domestic needs and pay foreign creditors.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See *The Path of Empire*, by Carl Russell Fish (in *The Chronicles of America*).