POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MILITARY INTERVENTION IN LATIN AMERICA

MARTIN C. NEEDLER
University of New Mexico

It is noteworthy that the recent spate of writings in the field of "political development" has shown a pronounced tendency to omit consideration of Latin America. Thus the "communications" and "bureaucracy" volumes in the SSRC political development series are totally innocent of Latin American data, as is an excellent recent treatment of—the political behavior of the military in developing areas.

The Latin Americanists, for their part, have largely stressed those key features of the area's politics which have long remained constant—executive predominance, military intervention, and the influence of the peculiarities of Hispanic culture. At the same time, it is clear that the social changes usually collectively termed "modernization"—urbanization, technological borrowing, and the development of mass communications grids—together with their political correlate, the expansion of the political community to include hitherto excluded social elements, are proceeding in Latin America too.

Accordingly, it becomes desirable to reexamine the "statics" of Latin American politics in the light of the "dynamics" of the processes of political development and social mobilization.

The present article attempts this reexamination with respect to the most characteristic feature of Latin American politics, the coup d'état and the establishment of a de facto military government.

A priori, mutually contradictory theses about the relations of the military coup to social development can be constructed—and indeed the literature on the subject abounds in such contradictory theses, evidence to support each of which is always available. These hypotheses focus on whether military intervention in politics, represented most typically by the extra-constitutional seizure of power, is (a) increasing or decreasing, and (b) occurring primarily with the object of promoting socio-economic change or of resisting it. Their starting points are the changes assumed to be going

This article forms part of a larger work currently in progress. I wish to thank the Horace H. Rackham Graduate School of the University of Michigan for the Faculty Summer Research Fellowship which enabled me to begin work on this subject, and the Harvard Center for International Affairs for the appointment as Research Associate which is enabling me to bring it to completion. I also wish to express my gratitude to Walter C. Soderlund, a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, whose research is reflected in the statistical data reported here.

A series of such pairs of mutually contradictory hypotheses drawn from the literature is neatly formulated by Lyle N. McAlister in his contribution to John J. Johnson (ed.), Continuity and Change in Latin America (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 158-159. Some authors point out the evidence that various mutually opposed tendencies exist without attempting to subsume them in some general formulation. This is Johnson's own approach: see his The Military and Society in Latin America (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), Introduction and Chapter IX; and also that of Irving Horowitz, "United States Policy and the Latin American Military Establishment," The Correspondent, Autumn 1964. Lieuwen reconciles opposing tendencies by means of positing cycles in which a set of trends in one direction is succeeded by a countervailing set; see his Arma and Politics in Latin America, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1961), esp. Chapter V.
forward in the armed forces—the growth of professionalism, recruitment from a wider range of the population, greater influence from the United States, etc.

Now if evidence can be cited on either side of a proposition about developmental tendencies, it is clearly necessary to quantify these items of evidence along a time dimension; what is needed, accordingly, are empirical data giving the change in the frequencies of the occurrence of each of the contrasting possibilities over time.

The empirical questions we want answered, therefore, are:

(1) Since the breakdown of early twentieth-century stability began the current period of change in Latin America, have coups d'état become more or less frequent?

(2) What changes have been occurring in the function of the coup in relation to changes taking place in the larger society?

(3) What are the effects of changes in the Latin American military on the form, structure, and timing of the coup d'état, and what political significance do these effects have?

INCIDENCE OF COUPS D'ÉTAT

One must first eschew the hopeless task of trying to account for coups d'état that were not successful. The categories of coups that were aborted, suppressed, or abandoned melt into each other and into a host of other non-coup phenomena so as to defy accounting. At the same time, of course, since coups are after all illegal, they are matured under conditions of secrecy which make it inevitable that the unsuccessful projects for coups which become known about represent a highly biased sample. At the same time, an unsuccessful coup attempt may be the work of one or two atypical people; its occurrence does not necessarily say anything about the state of the polity as a whole, as does a successful coup.

During the thirty-year period 1935–1964, there were 56 successful changes of government by extra-constitutional means in the twenty independent countries of Latin America. The frequency of their occurrence was as shown in Table 1.

That is, the number of successful coups normally fluctuates between one and three per year. The clearly exceptional period was that from 1938 to 1942, during which only a single coup took place.

The first explanation which suggests itself is that these were years of recuperation from depression in which economic conditions were improving and the performance of government was likely to be regarded as satisfactory. A very rough test of this hypothesis can be made on the basis of figures for annual changes in real per capita product given in the UN Statistical Yearbooks for the 1947–1963 period.

It should be borne in mind, here and at subsequent points, that statistical data from Latin America leave much to be desired. However, data are available, for most of the years during that period, for ten countries in which coups d'état occurred.

During 1947–63, it is possible to assert, real per capita income figures for these countries showed a rise over the previous year's figure 87 times, a drop 39 times, and remained the same ten times. (These figures cannot be assumed to be typical of Latin America as a whole, it should be noted, since it is precisely the countries whose economies are likely not to be improving which do not report reliable economic statistics.) If coups d'état occurred without relation to the state of the economy, one would then expect at least twice as many coups to have occurred in years which showed improvement as in those which showed deterioration, since there were more than twice as many “improvement years” as “deterioration years.” However, that is not the case. Of the fifteen coups occurring during years for which the economic data are available, seven took place during years which showed an improvement.

Table 1. Frequency of Successful Coups d'État in Latin America, by Year, 1935–1964

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Successful Coup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

seven during years of deterioration, and one when no change was reported. The incomplete nature of the evidence should be stressed; in future years more complete calculations will doubtless be possible; other factors, not now identifiable, may be partly responsible; but the available data are consistent with the hypothesis postulated, that the overthrow of a government is more likely when economic conditions worsen.²

It seems reasonable, accordingly, to regard the years of low coup activity from 1938 to 1942 as due to the economic recovery of that period. Since 1949, a very slight secular trend in the reduction of the frequency of coups may be discernible. Since economic conditions are generally improving, although irregularly, this too might be expected on the basis of the same premise. Yet it should be remembered that variation in economic conditions can be held responsible for only a part of the variation in the frequency of coups as, the data discussed above also show.

COUPS D'ÉTAT AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

We turn now to the question of changes in the function of the coup in relation to social and political change. This question is extremely awkward to get at, since the origins of coups are often obscure, and the intentions of those staging them mixed. The author nevertheless believes it sound to explain the coup functionally rather than genetically, or in terms of factors external to the military rather than of internal characteristics of the military establishment, because of several considerations.

First, a military coup is not made by the military alone. Almost invariably, the conspirators are in touch with civilian politicians and respond to their advice, counting on their assistance in justifying the coup to public opinion and helping to run the country afterwards. This relationship is frequently taken for granted by a coup only reluctantly staged by the military at the insistence of civilian politicians, who appeal to the officers' patriotism, the historic role of the army in saving the country at its hour of need—of which national history doubtless affords many examples—and so on.³ The chairman of one military junta which had outstayed its welcome spoke bitterly of some of its latter-day detractors "who used to cry at the doors of the barracks asking that the constitutional government be removed and even used to complain about the apathy of the military who did not want to act."¹⁰

Second, among the various conspirators, with their varying orientations and objectives, the position of those who can most count on outside support, whose own objectives are most in harmony with the aims of major outside forces, will be strengthened.

Third, the autonomy of the military decision to intervene may further be reduced by the fact that the political situation to which the military respond has been "engineered" by outside groups desiring intervention so as to trigger military predispositions in that direction. It is not unknown, for example, for Right-wing activists to fake "Communist" terrorist attempts in order to help create an atmosphere conducive to military intervention.¹¹

If the military coup is thus frequently called into play by the workings of the political system, what is its function in relation to social and economic change? Clearly, its purpose must increasingly be to thwart such change. This is so because the point of the coup is to prevent from happening what, it is assumed, would happen in its absence.¹²


¹⁰ Admiral Ramón Castro Jijón, quoted in the Diario Las Américas (Miami), May 28, 1964. For a detailed account of the creation of an interventionist frame of mind on the part of the military, see Chapter V of my Anatomy of a Coup d'État: Ecuador, 1963. Johnson gives an example from Brazil of public incitement of the military to revolt by civilians on p. 124 of his The Role of the Military in Developing Societies. Finer discusses the interventionist mood in Chapter 5 of The Man on Horseback.

¹¹ For one such case of which the author has personal knowledge, see Anatomy of a Coup d'État: Ecuador, 1963, p. 19.

¹² This is also Lieuwen's view: "On the balance, the armed forces have been a force for the preservation of the status quo; their political intervention has generally signified, as it does today, a conservative action. . . ." Edwin Lieuwen, "The Military: A Force for Continuity or Change," in John TePaske and Sydney N. Fisher (eds.), Ex-
Since social mobilization is proceeding, that is, constitutional presidents are likely to be responsive to social classes of progressively lower status, as these enter the political arena by moving to the city or otherwise become mobilized. The policies of each successive constitutional president are thus likely, on balance, to constitute a greater threat to the status quo than those of his predecessor. This may be interpreted to the military by those trying to secure their intervention as a threat to the personal interests of military officers in the economy at large, as a challenge to the military in its role of preserver of domestic order, or, most likely, as a long-term threat to the special status and privileges, and even the continued existence, of the military institution.\(^\text{13}\)

It thus seems probable that as social and economic development take place:

1. military intervention increasingly takes the form of an attempt by the possessing classes to maintain the status quo;
2. military intervention is increasingly directed against legally elected presidents heading constitutional regimes;
3. interventions increasingly occur to forestall the election and inauguration of reforming presidents; and
4. popular resistance to military intervention increases, resulting in greater likelihood that a military coup will lead to open fighting.

An analysis of the 56 successful insurrections\(^\text{14}\) which occurred in the 20 countries of Latin America during the thirty-year period 1935–1964 appears to confirm each of these hypotheses, and thus to substantiate the argument made above. Table 2 gives the numbers and percentages of insurrections during each of the three decades of the period in which:

1. The reformation of the social and economic status quo was clearly a goal of the conspiratorial group; this shows a decrease.
2. A low level of violence (essentially a bloodless coup without streetfighting or other popular involvement) was maintained; this also decreases.
3. Constitutional, rather than de facto governments were overthrown; this shows an increase.
4. The insurrection occurred during the 12 months prior to a scheduled presidential election, or in the four months immediately following; this likewise increased.

**Dynamics of Coup d'état**

Even if it be granted that the major determinants of the occurrence of a successful coup lie in the functioning of the total political system rather than in the internal dynamics of the military institution, those dynamics are of significance in such questions as the timing of the coup, and become especially important in determining the directions followed after the coup is successful and its leaders installed in government positions.

An examination of this problem must start from an appreciation of the fact that officers of the armed forces are not dominated by a single political viewpoint, but hold a variety of political orientations. The correlates of these political orientations in personal characteristics have not as yet been systematically evaluated and weighed for the Latin American military, along the lines of Morris Janowitz's *The Professional Soldier*.\(^\text{15}\) However, available evidence suggests that on top of a primary set of conditioning factors such as those which the American voting studies indicate are significant in

---

\(^{13}\) It is the conclusion of Lieuwen's insightful *Generals Vs. Presidents* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 101–107, that the last factor mentioned has been the crucial one in the recent coups.


party preference—that is, family tradition, social and economic level, and ethnic or other particularistic identification—is imposed a second set of factors peculiar to the military profession: rank, branch of service, occupational specialty, and career pattern. In a situation in which a coup d'état becomes a possibility, ranking military officers are called on to develop policy positions on the question of the continuance in office of the president. The position each officer assumes will have two components, one based on attitudes towards the president's personal abilities, his programs, and the arrangements he is making for the succession; the other, partially independent of the first, reflecting the officer's views on the question of military intervention in politics in general.

The changes which have been taking place in Latin American armed forces in recent years suggest that the variety of political views represented within the military services has been on the increase, as the social origins from which officers are drawn have become less upper-class,\(^{16}\) as the range of military technical specialties has been extended, and as the sheer size of military establishments has increased.\(^{17}\)


\(^{17}\) The evidence for these developments is summarized by Edwin Lieuwen in Chapter 5 of \textit{Arms and Politics in Latin America}, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1961), pp. 122–153. If one thought solely in terms of these factors, as some authors do, regarding military political activity exclusively as being "pushed" by pressures internal to the military, rather than being also "pulled" by the demands of the total political situation, then it would be logical to expect these changes to result in greater professionalism and techincism, reducing military involvement in politics, and in greater sympathy with the lower classes, rendering such involvement more progressive in orientation. Although several authors have assumed viewpoints of this type, they do not appear substantiated by the evidence cited above.

\(^{18}\) The concept of "weight" is discussed below.

---

**Table 2. Statistics of Successful Insurrections, by Decades, 1935–1964**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Reformist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Low in Violence</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Overthrew Constitutional Governments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Around Election Time</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

At the same time the increasing complexity of the governmental apparatus and the steady expansion of the proportion of the population which participates in politics, together with the technical improvement in the means of communication, have meant that a military coup needs itself to be more complex, to be more carefully planned, and to involve more people if it is to be successful. Because of heightened popular involvement in politics, a coup is also more likely to lead to open fighting, rather than being accepted passively by an indifferent population. Given the range of political orientations within the military services, then, the task of the organizer of a successful coup d'état is thus to build up a coalition of officers of a size and character adequate to execute the successful coup. The prime mover or movers in organizing the coup must therefore be engaged over a period of time in the process of building a coalition which will eventually exceed, in size and "weight,"\(^{18}\) the minimum necessary to insure success.

The originators of the conspiracy and the first to join it are those most opposed to the president and his policies, while other officers of different political orientations and a greater commitment to constitutional procedures have higher thresholds to interventionism. However, as time goes on, these thresholds will be reached for many officers as the tendency of the president's policies becomes clearer, as the country's situation, seen from their point of view, worsens, or as the succession problem becomes more acute with the approach of the end of the president's term.
It is of course possible that as time goes on
the changes which take place in the situation
are such as to reduce the degree of hostility to
the president on the part of the organizers of
the conspiracy, which may then disintegrate.
It seems clear, however, that a successful coup
would show a curve of support within the ranks
of the military, rising over time and beginning
with the original instigator of the plot, who re-
resents the most extreme opposition to the
president. The development of the curve of
military support for the coup is likely to be ex-
ponential as the end of the president's term
approaches. Under normal conditions the presi-
dent prepares to hand over power to a successor
of his own party or orientation, sometimes us-
ing not only his personal influence but also
extra-legal techniques to guarantee the succe-
sion. This raises the prospect of another four or
six years of the same policies; yet the trepida-
tion of those who oppose them necessarily in-
creases. The heir-apparent is in part an un-
known quantity, which is disquieting; his pre-
vious public service will normally have taken
place as a member of the president's cabinet, in
which his own views necessarily had to be sub-
ordinated to those of his chief.

If there is a chance that the heir-apparent
would be defeated in the elections, the con-
spirators may await their outcome before
striking. If he is indeed defeated, the need for
conspiracy disappears; if he is elected, it then
becomes necessary to strike before his inaugu-
rations, since his actual occupancy of the presi-
dency would enable him to consolidate his
power. Yet it is risky to wait until after the
elections, which will mobilize his supporters
and which may give him a strong mandate and
thus strengthen his position with domestic and
foreign opinion.

Thus, for these reasons also, the likelihood of
a coup d'état could be expected to increase as a
president's term wears on, reaching its high
point prior to a scheduled election but remain-
ing high until the inauguration of a new presi-
dent, this tendency becoming more marked
over time, in response not only to the accelerat-
ing social mobilization of the masses but also to
the increases in the size, technical differentia-
tion, and range of social origins of the officer
 corps.

Within the group of conspirators, then, a
series of thresholds to interventionism is pres-
ent, the lowest being that of the instigator (or
group of instigators) of the plot, the highest
being that of the last man (or group) to join in
the coup before it is launched. The position of
this hypothetical last adherent to the conspir-
acy is interesting to consider. If one recalls that
the success of the coup is predicated on the
formation of a decisive coalition to support it,
then it is clear that the last adherent or set of
adherents to the movement provided the criti-
cal margin of support, not just in its size, but
especially in its "weight."

The importance of this hypothetical "swing
man" in the situation, that is, may be due to
any one of a series of factors—his personal in-
fluence within the armed forces; his prestige
among the public; and/or his critical position in
the command structure of the armed forces. It
then becomes probable that because of his
higher rank, greater prestige, and crucial im-
portance for the coup, the "swing man" is
placed at the head of the provisional govern-
ment that emerges after the revolt is success-
ful—as provisional president, as chairman of
the ruling military junta, or as minister of the
armed forces behind the façade of a civilian
provisional government.\(^{19}\)

An interesting and paradoxical situation is
thus created. The "swing man" becomes the
leading figure in the new government; yet he is
the person who was least committed to the
objectives of the coup, whose threshold to in-
tervention was the highest of all the conspira-
tors, and who was a last-minute addition to the
conspiracy perhaps out of sympathy with, or
not even aware of, the more fundamental aims
of the group that hatched the original plan. In-
deed, a situation can actually be created in
which the head of the new government actually
sympathized with the aims of the conspiracy
not at all, but joined it at the last minute only
to avoid pitting brother officers against each
other, possibly precipitating a civil war.

These characteristics of the "swing man"
can perhaps be made clearer by an illustra-
tion. A classical occupant of the role of "swing
man" has been Marshal Castelo Branco of
Brazil. A New York Times reporter described
his position in the 1964 coup as follows:

"General Humberto de Alencar Castelo
Branco has been called a 'general's general.' He
rose to his present post of Army Chief of Staff
after a long professional career in which he
gained the high respect of his fellow officers but
remained virtually unknown to the general
public ...

"In the present crisis, the soft-spoken general
first played the role of the reluctant dragon in

\(^{19}\) This set of dynamics is of course not peculiar
to Latin America. Classic occupants of the role of
"swing man," with local variations, have been
Naguib in Egypt, Gürsel in Turkey, Aguiyi-Irons in
Nigeria—or even de Gaulle in France.
refusing to join the developing movement against President João Goulart. His scruples were the same as those of many other Brazilian officers: The Brazilian Army has a tradition of protecting legality and the Constitution, and General Castelo Branco was not eager to become involved in a coup against a constitutional President.

"But the general became convinced that the continuation of the Goulart regime would lead Brazil to chaos and possibly a sharp shift toward the extreme left. He then drafted a position paper, the 'Castelo Branco analysis' that became the justification for the army's support of last week's rebellion.

"Such is the respect enjoyed by the short, stocky, bull-necked general, that his analysis served as the turning point in the hesitations of many commanders in the crisis over Mr. Goulart."20

Clearly, in this kind of situation ample material exists for a conflict to emerge within the new provisional government. The conflict develops along the following lines. The erstwhile "swing man," now, let us say, president of the provisional junta, regards the objectives of the coup as realized with the overthrow of the former President and begins to make preparations to return the country to constitutional normality and to hold elections. The original instigator of the coup and the group around him, on the other hand, resist this tendency and instead urge the necessity for the military to keep power for a longer period, to purge all sympathizers with the deposed president completely from public life, to outlaw his party indefinitely, and to restructure political life to make it impossible for the tendency which he represents again to come to power.

During the recent period the basic situation described above has been reproduced in reality most faithfully in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru, and with local variations in Guatemala, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras.

In Argentina this basic set of dynamics has played itself out again and again since the overthrow of Perón in 1955, the irreconcilable anti-Perón forces being known as the colorados, or "reds," whose most characteristic figure is Admiral Isaac Rojas.21

Due to the more amorphous character of politics in Brazil, the same basic situation crystallized more slowly. The opposition between the military irreconcilables and the heirs of Getúlio Vargas has nevertheless been waged intermittently for 10 years. The coup staged to prevent the inauguration of Kubitschek and Goulart in 1955 was unsuccessful; the coup designed to prevent the inauguration of Goulart as President in 1962 succeeded merely in having the powers of the presidency temporarily curtailed; only with the overthrow of Goulart in 1964 was the military anti-Getulista movement fully successful. After the successful revolt of 1964, the pattern described above became operative in its purest form, with conflict developing between the prestigious "swing man," Marshal Castelo Branco, metamorphosed into Provisional President, and the linha dura, the "hard line" of the irreconcilable military opposition to the heirs of Vargas.22

A similar process took place in Peru following the coup d'état of 1962. For 30 years the commanding officers of the armed forces had resisted the assumption of power by the revolutionary APRA movement, despite the fact that it commanded a majority, or at least a plurality, of the votes during the entire period. The party had begun in the 'twenties and 'thirties as a revolutionary Marxoid group, strongly anti-Yankee and prepared to use violence. During the 30-odd years of its sojourn in the wilderness, however, the party leadership, and especially the party's founder, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, had "evolved" to a more moderate position of which anti-communism was the central principle. At the same time, in the search for a respectability which would allay the misgivings of the military about the party, APRA's major tactician, Ramiro Prísalé, led the party into alliance with increasingly more conservative forces, culminating shortly after the 1962 presidential election in an entente with the forces of General Manuel Odria. This was clearly the ultimate stage of the party's evolution, since Odria was a former military dictator who had outlawed and persecuted the party during his period of office,

20 "Man in the News," New York Times, April 6, 1964. Typographic errors in the original have been corrected.

21 See Arthur Whitaker, Argentine Upheaval (New York: Praeger, 1956); Lieuwen, Generals vs. Presidents, pp. 10–25; James W. Rowe, The Argentine Elections of 1963: An Analysis, (Wash-
and who had run his election campaign in 1962 on a militantly anti-APRA platform. Haya had gathered more votes than any of the other candidates in the presidential elections of 1962, although only a handful more than Fernando Belaúnde and fewer than the one-third of the vote necessary to prevent the election’s being decided by Congress. However, the new Congress, due to the vagaries of the electoral system, heavily over-represented the APRA. Immediately following the election, the coup was staged, the leaders of the armed forces implausibly charging that the electoral results were vitiated by widespread fraud. In an unsuccessful last-minute attempt to avert the coup, the APRA leadership announced that its congressional votes would go to General Odria in a self-sacrificing attempt to break the impasse and avert the breakdown of constitutional procedures.

This situation made possible the emergence of a more muted version of the split which occurred in the Argentine and Brazilian cases. The ranking officer of the military junta, General Ricardo Pérez Godoy, was willing to return the country to constitutionality on the basis of the APRA offer to have its congressmen vote for Odria. The two key younger members of the junta, Generals Lindley López and Vargas Prada, who had personal and family ties to Belaúnde, opposed this solution, which would enable the APRA to exact concessions, for example in the shape of posts in an Odria administration. Pérez Godoy was accordingly forced to resign and the reconstituted junta presided, during 1963, over elections in which, because of the withdrawal of two minor candidates, Belaúnde was successful.23

It appears overwhelmingly likely that as time goes on and popular participation in the processes of politics becomes greater, the Peruvian type of situation, in which as long as a period as necessary the popular choice is kept out of the presidency by repeated military intervention, will become increasingly common. As was suggested above, the pattern has extended itself to Argentina and Brazil already. Honduran politics seem to be moving in the same direction as the army has become increasingly committed against the Liberal party; the Guatemalan military staged their coup in 1964 to prevent the return to power of Juan José Arévalo; and the Dominican armed forces have clearly attempted to assume a similar position relative to Juan Bosch and the Dominican Revolutionary Party.

The logic of this type of situation suggests that the conflict between the most popular individual or party on the one hand, and the military irreconcilables on the other, tends to go on for some time, rather than being resolved by a single coup. This occurs for two reasons. In the military junta which forms after a coup, first of all, the irreconcilables normally are in a superior strategic position. The more moderate “swing man,” whose prestige has entitled him to the chairmanship of the junta, may wish to restore constitutional processes as soon as possible. If this is likely to lead to the coming to power of the individual or tendency originally vetoed by the coup, however, the position of the junta president becomes untenable. Although he occupies the position with most authority and he may have placed close associates in the cabinet, theirs are not the key posts under showdown conditions: the key posts belong to those in direct command of troops, that is, the minister of the armed forces, the three service commanders, and even the commanders in the field. Because of this lack of congruence between the positions of authority when affairs are moving smoothly and the positions of power when a split develops, it is normally easier in such a situation to stage a coup d’état than to prevent one.24 The odds are therefore that the irreconcilables will be able to prevent the return to constitutionality for an extended period if this should seem likely to favor the archetype.

Once military elements have vetoed the popular leader and his party, moreover, the hostility between the two becomes self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing, since those who participated in the original coup have reason to believe they will forfeit at least their careers, and perhaps more, if the outlawed party should ever gain power. As one Dominican colonel put it after the coup of 1963 when he was asked his attitude towards a return of Juan Bosch: “If Bosch ever comes back, he will throw me into jail so deep I will never find my way out.” Because of this set of circumstances the restoration of constitutional procedures becomes extremely difficult: unless the distribution of voter sentiment changes drastically it is only too likely that the person or party which se-


24 In one variant of this situation, the provisional president may save his own personal position by switching sides at the last minute and adopting the program of the “hard liners,” if the forces they can marshal seem decisive. This tactic was adopted by Castelo Branco in early 1966.
cured a majority in the last election would do as well in the next one. A temporary return to constitutionality may be possible on the basis of rigged or restricted elections, as has been the case in Argentina. Nevertheless, the Argentine political problem is not permanently solved. Given the persistence of the military irreconcilables and their point of view, the only permanent resolution of the problem lies in: (1) the definitive removal from the political scene of the vetoed leader by death or his renunciation of politics; (2) a shift in the distribution of popular opinion to the disadvantage of the vetoed party; or (3) the party’s gaining respectability by drastic modification of its program or tactics. In Latin America, the third alternative seems a formal possibility only, since the irreconcilables may simply refuse to believe that the shift towards respectability is genuine. Thus the military veto against the APRA was still applied in 1962, despite the party’s evolution to a moderate Center or even Right-of-Center position. If the political problem has in fact been resolved in Peru—and this is not yet clear—it has been by way of the second alternative, in that the APRA may have been driven permanently below a third of the vote by a combination of disaffection from the Left as the party’s leadership has grown more conservative, and the permanent establishment in popular favor of Belaúnde’s Acción Popular. Elsewhere a similar result may be achieved, at least temporarily, by the expansion or contraction of the electorate to shift the balance of forces against the vetoed political movement—by giving the vote to resident aliens, for example, or by taking it away from illiterates.

CONCLUSIONS

This examination of the internal logic of the Latin American coup d’état in the circumstances of the current phase of history has so far led to three conclusions. First: the overthrow of a government is more likely when economic conditions are deteriorating. Second: as the military services have become larger and more various in the social origins of their officers, as military occupational specializations have become more differentiated and more highly professionalized, and as elections have become representative of the sentiments of a wider range of the population, coups d’état have tended increasingly to occur in the period immediately prior to a presidential election and the subsequent inauguration, to be conservative in policy orientation, to be directed against constitutional governments, and to be accompanied by violence. Third: the tendency has emerged for conflict to develop, following a coup d’état, between a more fundamentalist “hard line,” and a “soft line” that shows greater readiness to restore constitutional procedures and is normally represented by officers of higher rank, occupying positions of greater prestige in the provisional government.

It is possible to draw a further conclusion, with policy implications for the United States, from this analysis. There has long existed a difference of opinion among students of U.S. foreign policy as to both the desirability and the feasibility of attempting to discourage military seizures of power in Latin America. The desirability argument is outside our present province, but it is possible for us now to add something on the feasibility question—that is, how successful United States attempts to discourage military coups can be.

The failure of the United States to recognize a provisional government issuing from an extra-constitutional seizure of power, plus the imposition of other mild sanctions such as the suspension of military and economic aid, is of different effect to countries differently situated. The smaller countries whose economies are more dependent on actions of the United States—Bolivia, plus the countries of Central America and the Caribbean—are more susceptible to United States pressures than the larger South American countries. Nevertheless, examples can be cited of military coups which have taken place despite clear United States opposition, even in countries in the Caribbean area. These have been regarded as indicating that American opposition to such coups is ineffective. The coup which took place in Peru in 1962, and the 1963 coups in Honduras and the Dominican Republic, for example, took place in the face of strong and explicit American opposition.

It still seems premature to conclude that American opposition to the military seizure of power is bound to be ineffectual, however. One problem here is methodological, since it is not possible to enumerate the coups d’état that did not take place (although in two countries where American influence is heavy and which have known a history of military seizures of power, Venezuela and Panama, the constitutional succession has in recent years been unbroken while other countries of the area were experiencing violent changes of government). If the analysis made above is correct, however, the success of a coup d’état depends, especially where the military services are large and highly differenti-
ated, on the adherence to the coup in its later stages of officers least committed to its goals, less inclined to military intervention, and with more prestige and a higher position at stake. Since the success of the coup thus may well depend on its being joined by relatively few officers with a relatively weak commitment to its goals, it seems overwhelmingly likely that any deterrent to intervention—such as the suspension of military aid, or a credible threat not to recognize the new government—while not sufficient to deter the hard-core organizers of the coup, may nevertheless be sufficient to tip the scales against intervention for the crucial "swing man," or for the small group occupying the same tactical position, and thus may cause the coup to be abandoned, or to be launched without adequate support and thus to prove abortive.

In the coup situation, accordingly, even the mildest deterrent threat, such as a firmly stated non-recognition policy on the part of the United States, may still be effective, because of the pre-coup balance of forces.

Light can also be thrown on the general problem raised in the opening section of the article, that of the relation between the constant features of Latin American politics and developmental trends, by an examination of the varying incidence over time of the characteristic military dictatorship in the area.

Here observers have tended to divide into the optimists, who perceive the evolutionary forces at work in the area as tending in a democratic direction, and the cynics, who take an attitude of "plus ça change . . . ." The incidence of military dictatorships in the area seems to support the views first of one group,
then of the other. A few years after Tad Szulc published his *Twilight of the Tyrants*, which celebrates the replacement of dictators by democratic regimes, Edwin Lieuwen can write a *Generals Vs. Presidents*, which analyzes the reverse phenomenon.

The relation of cyclical and evolutionary patterns on this point can best be demonstrated by a graph. Figure 1 plots the number of unequivocally dictatorial regimes in power during at least six months of each year over the period of the last 30 years during which evolutionary changes have clearly been occurring.

Conclusions of great interest can be drawn. Clearly, the factors which produce military dictatorships seem in part cyclical. At the same time, the cyclical pattern reproduces itself around a clearly descending trend line, so that each successive peak in the number of dictatorships existing contemporaneously is lower than the last: in 1936–37, there were fifteen dictatorships; in 1942–43, there were twelve; in 1955–56, there were ten. Similarly, successively lower levels of dictatorship are reached at each low point of the cycle: in 1939, nine dictatorships; in 1948, six; in 1961, three.

The conclusion seems inescapable that, in this respect as in the others examined, while Latin American politics has certain abiding characteristics which produce its distinctive features, these are being progressively modified under the influence of forces of an evolutionary character.

---


27 To be considered “dictatorial,” a government:

1. Had to be not an avowedly provisional regime holding office for 36 months or less;
2. Had to come to power, or remain in power after the conclusion of the constitutionally prescribed term of office, by means other than a free and competitive election; or rule in clear disregard of constitutionally guaranteed liberties.

28 The idea of approaching the problem in this fashion was suggested to the author by Ronald Schneider’s article “The U. S. in Latin America” in *Current History* for January, 1965.
You have printed the following article:

Political Development and Military Intervention in Latin America
Martin C. Needler
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0554%28196609%2960%3A3%3C616%3APDAMII%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

[Footnotes]

21 Parties and Politics in Argentina: The Elections of 1962 and 1963
Peter G. Snow
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-3397%28196502%299%3A1%3C1%3APAPIAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V

NOTE: The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.