

The United States & Cuba: Hegemony And Dependent Development, 1880-1934

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Reviews of Books

The United States and Cuba: Hegemony and Dependent Development, 1880-1934. By Jules Robert Benjamin. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977. Pp. xii, 188. \$14.95.

This is a detailed study of the long and tangled relationship between the United States and Cuba. Professor Benjamin focuses on American economic and political involvement in Cuba, on the fundamental assumptions of American policymakers, and on the response of the American government to instability there. He often shifts from the American to the Cuban perspective, seeking to explain changes in that island's economy and society and the reaction of its leaders to American policies.

Although Benjamin searches out the nineteenth-century roots of the relationship, the bulk of his book deals with the late 1920s and early 1930s. During these years the drastic decline in the price of sugar brought the Cuban economy close to collapse and placed new strains on the island's fragile social and political structure. Benjamin traces the increasing brutality and ineffectiveness of the Machado regime, the growth of radical nationalism, and its eventual frustration in January 1934 with the collapse of the government of Grau San Martín. Throughout the book he is sensitive to the impact of the massive American presence in Cuba and notes in particular its effect on Cuba's ruling elite. Much of this elite was tainted by its close identification with the United States, and even those who moved toward moderate nationalism continued to seek accommodation with the American government. As a result, none of the American-supported governments of this or later periods achieved a true legitimacy among the Cuban people. Benjamin emphasizes—perhaps too much—the extent to which the fate of Cuba was determined by decisions made in Washington.

There is no doubt that the American government had much influence on the course of events in Cuba, and part of the interest of this study lies in its explanation of the complex economic and political interactions in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Despite deteriorating conditions in Cuba, Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson resisted pressure for political intervention, correctly foreseeing the difficulty of limiting American interference. The Roosevelt administration, however, was less circumspect, and it devoted much attention to Cuba in 1933 and 1934. Roosevelt's chief adviser on Cuban and Latin American affairs, Sumner Wells, had no doubts about the need for a vigorous policy. As the new American ambassador to Cuba, he plunged into the shifting currents of Cuban politics. Confident of his grasp of conditions there, Wells was inclined toward military intervention and was instrumental in the fall of the Grau San Martín government and in the rise to power of Fulgencio Batista. Benjamin explains the array of political and economic weapons at his command, the more cautious attitude of the President and Department of State, and the intricate balance that had to be struck between the viewpoints of the ambassador in Havana, the bureaucracies in Washington, and American business groups and their representatives in Congress. He argues that the Roosevelt administration, like its predecessors, was determined to maintain the American economic presence in Cuba. Concerned over the decline of American-Cuban trade, both officials and businessmen worked to restructure economic relations between the two nations.

This book is strong on details but weak in its effort to weave all the disparate threads into larger patterns of interpretation. The organization tends to isolate economic and political diplomacy and does not provide a full picture of internal

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