

Imperialism and Democracy in Cuba

By Arnold August, April 2012

In Chapter 4 of my book, we read how, in the 1868–98 Wars of Independence, Cubans developed their own political system, the Republic in Arms, within the Spanish colony. It featured the development of constituent assemblies and constitutions written by the Cubans themselves. Another characteristic was the expansion of suffrage irrespective of wealth and property to all males over 16 years of age. The Cuban tradition was also based on popular participation at the grass-roots level. It can be said that these were the initial stages of a democracy in motion.

In Chapter 2, we see how the U.S. currently uses a combination of “pure presidential political opportunism” and co-optation through the “two-party, competitive system” to safeguard the status quo based on unlimited accumulation of private property. This analysis is developed based on the case study on Barack Obama’s 2008 election and mandate. However, these U.S. politics have had long-standing roots in the U.S. political system for many decades. It is instructive to see how the U.S. presence in Cuba, even from 1898 on, used tactics similar to the current “pure presidential political opportunism” and co-optation. Of course, these schemes were applied to the Cuban conditions existing at that time.

How did it take place? What happened after the U.S. took control of Cuba in 1898? *Leonard Wood: Rough Rider, Surgeon, Architect of American Imperialism* is the title of a book published in 2006. The author, Jack McCallum, paints a relatively favourable picture of Wood as the principal envoy of the U.S. His mandate was to convert the virtual Cuban victory over Spain into a defeat for Cuba and thus appropriate Cuba as its own. Once accomplished, Wood’s mandate was to convert Cuba into a U.S. neo-colony.

In opposition to the growing Cuban experience in democracy, the U.S. policy that Wood carried out consisted of several important elements, which were inspired by the U.S. approach to democracy. This course consisted of promoting their democracy under the aegis of imperialism, as McCallum himself terms this policy. Wood, playing his role as the chief promoter of the U.S. approach to democracy applied to the Cuban conditions, was thus doing so as part of the sponsorship of U.S. imperialism. First, synthesizing these factors meant the restriction of suffrage in line with U.S. tradition, as analyzed in detail in Chapter 2 of my book. This was carried out side by side with the manipulation of

elections so that the results would be favourable to the U.S. Second, the U.S. relied on the policy of co-opting those elements in the Cuban political system that could be considered friendly to the U.S. domination of Cuba. Third, these co-opted individuals had to have a certain level of credibility in the eyes of the Cubans. This was the case given the omnipresent danger of a resurgence of the nineteenth-century independence war. The U.S. wanted to avoid this at all costs. Fourth, the co-optation could not take place without the collaboration of individuals who were willing to be co-opted for presidential office in order to serve their own personal profit and motivations. Fifth, the policy of co-opting those who would favour the U.S. had its origins in the policies adopted by Wood and his collaborators in order to defeat the Indigenous peoples in the U.S. itself. Sixth, Wood also drew from his experience in the U.S., namely isolating the Indigenous resistance from their economic and social base in order to weaken them.

For the readers to reach their own conclusions, the following citations serve as an appendix. They are drawn from McCallum's book, with some comments added for explanatory reasons along with the specific page reference in brackets. Wood, a surgeon turned military officer, acquired his military tactics from the wars against the Indigenous peoples in the U.S. itself. One of the first ploys was the art of co-optation. It is not only an important feature of both past and current U.S. domestic politics, but also characteristic of expansion toward other territories. Citing from my book:

For a little more than a year Crook could brag that there was not a single hostile Apache in his department. Crook's combination of sympathy for indigenous opponents who followed his rules and implacable opposition to those who did not would make a lasting impression on young Leonard Wood. A second Crook strategy that Wood later employed in both Cuba and the Philippines was using natives to control natives. (19)

[Wood received] the Medal of Honor for his part in the Geronimo Campaign. (45)

The American business community pushed McKinley to intervene in Cuba for economic and geopolitical reasons, but war fever in the general public sprang from rampant nationalism, and Roosevelt and Wood were in the vanguard of the chauvinistic expansionists. (55)

On February 15, the battleship *Maine*, in Havana on a mission that was somewhere between dubious and

intentionally inflammatory, blew up under mysterious circumstances, and Congress, the press, and public opinion united to paint McKinley into a corner. America had contemplated absorbing Cuba for most of the nineteenth century. (56)

“The flower of Western manhood ... splendid types of American citizens, cultured and educated” ... were called Rough Riders in reference to their equestrian abilities and not their behavior. (65)

The Cuban expedition was not just a chance to broaden their [Rough Riders] personal horizons, it was a chance to show the world that the fractured American nation was ready to unite and export its particular and particularly successful brand of popular democracy to the rest of the world. They were taking themselves and their nation onto the world stage and, with the encouragement of publicists like Hearst and Pulitzer, even the least sophisticated understood precisely what they were about. (93)

[Once the Spanish were defeated in Santiago de Cuba and the Cubans pushed aside by the U.S. in order to control Cuba] Wood used a two-part strategy. First he paid the men to help clean Santiago, anticipating they would use the money to re-establish their farms. Second, emulating Crook’s Apache policy, he relocated food stores to rural depots so the men would stay on their farms rather than coming to the city for supplies. (121–22)

Wood decided from the outset to rely on the “better class” of Cubans to build his government and to push the *insurrectos* [the Liberation Army or *mambises* fighters] and the *reconcentrados* [victims of the Spanish concentration camps] back to farms in the countryside. (125)

The only credible threat to Wood’s authority was [Calixto] García [one of the main Cuban *mambises* generals] and his 23,000 armed, unemployed *insurrectos* in the countryside around Santiago. Again, Wood got his solution by emulating Crook [Apache policy]. Whenever possible, he made the soldiers trade their arms for food and sent them back to the farms. He proposed giving every veteran one *caballería* (33 1/3 acres) of public land to farm, although that proposal was never adopted. He turned those he could not convince to become farmers into policemen in a newly constituted Rural Guard. Those who refused to do either he declared bandits and had hunted down and shot. (125)

Wood was certain his government could not succeed unless the Cuban people agreed to respect civil authority without being subject to military force. He feared that, if control relied on the army rather than consent of the governed (not to be confused with their participation) [insertion by the author, Jack McCallum, in parentheses], Cubans would drift back to a corrupt bureaucracy. (129)

His tendency to enlist members of the upper class continued to distress the *insurrectos*, who were almost without exception from outside that social stratum. (132)

[In organizing the new governing cabinet, Wood chose] Juan Bautista Hernández, dean of the legal faculty at the University of Havana and a long-time supporter of the revolution, as secretary of public education. Wood's choices, while certainly not the most radical Cubans, had good enough credentials and enough revolutionary background to win the almost universal approval of the Cuban press. (152)

Wood and [U.S. Secretary of War] Root were convinced that any long-term relationship between Cuba and the United States had to be based on the willing cooperation of the Cuban people. Both men believed in democracy, but the general and the secretary were also firmly convinced that universal suffrage was a recipe for disaster. (157–58)

[In preparation for the first municipal elections] although Root and Wood were convinced an educated populace was [a] prerequisite to full democracy, they felt obligated to take a few steps toward limited self-government....

The first decision was who should be allowed to vote. Masó [a former *mambí* independence fighter] and the [other] insurrectionist leaders favored universal (male) suffrage, a prospect that terrified the Cuban upper classes.... The Americans found the upper classes, especially the Iberians, easier to relate to than native Cubans. The municipal election's outcome would most certainly be determined by who voted, and Wood and Root did not want the poor and illiterate at the polls. On February 16, 1900, the governor appointed a thirteen-member election commission most of which was Cuban, but two of whom were Wood's men, to consider the question. The committee submitted two reports: the majority recommended universal suffrage. Wood's representatives favored sharp restrictions, and the governor accepted the latter. Any twenty-one-year-old male who was

either a native of the island or a Spaniard who had surrendered his Spanish citizenship, who had no felony convictions, and who had lived at least thirty days in his municipality, could vote provided he met one of three additional qualifications: he must be able to read and write, or he must own real or personal property worth \$250, or he must have served in the Cuban army prior to July 18, 1898. The last pacified the insurgent generals by giving their soldiers the vote, but had limited effect because only a small minority of Cubans had actually fought in the revolution. The one other group Wood wanted enfranchised were Cuban exiles who had taken American citizenship. These men were educated, politically active, and mostly favored American annexation. (164–65)

The results were not what Wood wanted or expected, but elections had “passed off without disturbance ... [Root wrote]” and the Cubans had voted for the first time in their history.... Considering the course of imperialism in the rest of the world at the turn of the century and the fact that the United States had only been in Cuba two years, the election was surprisingly successful. (166)

[In preparation for the Constituent Assembly] he [Wood] meant for the elected convention to discuss and presumably approve a document he would submit. He told Root, “I am going to work on a Constitution for the Island similar to our own and embody in the organic act certain definite relations and agreements between the United States and Cuba [the eventual Platt Amendment, which gave the right to the U.S. to militarily intervene in Cuba].” (181)

The [S]ecretary [of War, Root,] added that the Treaty of Paris left America with an obligation to protect Cuba and the Monroe Doctrine made it a right. (182)

Wood’s orders from Washington were, however, clear; Cuba was to be independent. That being settled, Wood assured Roosevelt (now president after McKinley’s assassination) he was still confident the Cubans would eventually ask for annexation since, with “little or no real independence left Cuba under the Platt Amendment,” the more sensible Cubans realized their only course was to join the United States. Still, the “sensible” Cubans to whom Wood was speaking were neither the majority nor the elected. (191)

The governor [Wood], in spite of repeated claims that the electoral process [for the first presidential elections after

the adoption of the Constitution] was free of interference, fired mayors who supported Masó [a former *mambísi* fighter] and appointed the five-man election supervisory board entirely from Palma's [a pro-U.S. candidate] campaign executive committee. Masó decided he had no chance and withdrew, advising his supporters to boycott the election. (194)¹

This is how the politics were administered in Cuba under U.S. neo-colonial rule from 1898 until the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959. Chapter 4 deals with some other aspects of U.S. policy in Cuba during that period.

¹ McCallum, Jack. 2006. *Leonard Wood: Rough Rider, Surgeon, Architect of American Imperialism*. NY and London: New York University Press.