

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

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No. 303

Published on 5 May 2011

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Tom Maddux and

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Glen J. Dorn. "Pushing Tin: U.S.-Bolivian Relations and the Coming of the National Revolution." *Diplomatic History* 35:2 (April 2011): 233-258. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00947.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00947.x>**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR303.pdf>

Review by **Ken Lehman**, Hampden-Sydney College

The thesis of Glen J. Dorn's interesting article is that Bolivia's *sexenio*, the six years leading up to the 1952 National Revolution, "presented perhaps the ideal proving ground for the architects of the postwar Pax Americana" to bolster democracy, promote liberal capitalism, and neutralize threats from radical nationalists. "Instead," Dorn observes, "Truman's national security planners undercut the Bolivian government at almost every turn and, in the process, opened a 'running sore in our entire relationship with Latin America.'" (233) The evidence he provides seems incontrovertible. During the crucial six-years between the lynching of military populist president Gualberto Villarroel in 1946 and the April 1952 revolution led by the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR), U.S. policy failed in just about every imaginable way. Paraphrasing the charges State Department officials themselves leveled at the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), Truman's policies undercut the supply of strategic resources, fed anti-Americanism in the region, strengthened enemies of the United States inside Bolivia, undermined that country's weak democracy, and probably helped speed revolution and the nationalization of tin. (251)

The article is taken from Dorn's book (forthcoming from Penn State University Press), which provides the first (and much needed) book-length, published account of the *sexenio* in English. I've been privileged to see the manuscript and Dorn makes valuable contributions to the historiographies of Bolivia, of Truman's foreign policy, and of Latin American-U.S. relations in the early Cold War. He draws on Bolivian archives as well as on several important new archival sources in the U.S. to study the period and tells the story with exceptional organizational clarity. In the book, as in his article, Dorn demonstrates very clearly, and with impressive documentation, that Truman's policies were obtuse, inconsistent, ignorant, and ultimately self-defeating.

These failings were less the result of gross incompetence than of disinterest, however. During World War II, the Roosevelt administration had made commitments to Bolivia in order to ensure the flow of vital resources like tin, rubber, and quinine. With the war over and Truman's attention on Europe, Asia, and a full agenda of domestic challenges, Bolivia receded in importance. Under post-war conditions, the Truman administration tried to distance itself from earlier commitments to help Bolivian producers readjust to peacetime markets (a pledge made by Roosevelt himself in a May 1942 meeting with Bolivian president Enrique Peñaranda) to fund alternative development strategies that would reduce dependence on tin (as recommended by the 1941 Bohan Report), or to work with the tin barons to improve worker conditions in the mines (as suggested by the MacGruder Commission after the 1942 Catavi Massacre at a mine owned by Simón Patiño.)<sup>1</sup> As Bolivia lost importance, the Truman State Department failed to mediate or contain the battle of competing bureaucracies and conflicting agency agendas and *sexenio* policies in Bolivia became the muddle that Dorn so effectively describes.

The choice of Irving Florman as ambassador, certainly among the least qualified persons ever named an official representative of the United States government, clearly demonstrates Bolivia's place in Washington's post-war priorities. Dorn describes the ambassador's ill-considered meddling to thwart Memento Urriolagoitia's plan to seize foreign exchange earnings from the tin barons, but his chronology is confusing which also confuses the exact causes and the significance of Florman's interference. (248-249) The Korean War began in June 1950. Tin prices immediately began to rise and in July, as Dorn notes, the U.S. signed a contract with Bolivia for a significant increase in price. Urriolagoitia's decree came in August after the barons had refused to agree to a one-year windfall tax surcharge or even to provide low-interest loans to assist the cash-strapped government.<sup>2</sup> The Korean War was therefore the cause of the clash between the tin barons and Urriolagoitia and not the "surprising development that occurs which keeps the country from falling into the abyss," as Dorn implies. (249) And Florman's actions were more than a gaffe, they were an egregious interference in Bolivia's internal affairs. For all his obtuse arrogance, RFC head Stuart Symington was right when he observed that "a few wealthy Bolivians, most living outside the country, refused to invest foreign exchange at home unless forced to do so to protect their Bolivian interests," and so was Senator Lyndon Johnson when he said that there was "precious little chance of the money

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<sup>1</sup> Among other works, these commitments are described in Kenneth D. Lehman, *Bolivia and the United States: A Limited Partnership* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1999), chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> For details see National Archives, Record Group 59 (NA): 824.00/7-2050 and appendix-- report from Richard Goode, UN advisor, 20 July 1950 and the exchange between the State Department and the embassy in La Paz covered in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, (Washington, 1951) volume II, "The American Republics," 752-754.

paid the tin barons ever ‘trickling down’ to the Bolivian people.”<sup>3</sup> Both were more astute than Florman.

For his efforts, Florman earned the contempt of his counselors and a TNT-filled two-liter milk tin bomb, lined with concrete, left outside his office. It might well have “created another vacant ambassadorship” if it had not been discovered before it detonated.<sup>4</sup> After the bomb, Florman became increasingly paranoid and his dispatches to the State Department ever more bizarre. In April 1951, Florman wrote Truman directly, telling the president that he was convinced that there were agents within the Embassy that wished to have him “murdered by Communists.”<sup>5</sup> Inexplicably, and fully supporting Dorn’s thesis, it took the State Department eight more months to remove him. Finally, at the end of a tense year of tin negotiations, he was gone, having left such a mess that the Department turned next to a truly professional diplomat, Edward Sparks, who displayed all the qualities Florman lacked. Sparks’ skill, patience, and sympathy for the revolution were as crucial to the survival of the MNR government as Florman’s ignorant gaffes had been in undermining *sexenio* governments.

This fact underscores a contradiction that appears at the outset of Dorn’s article. The introductory thesis paragraph which lays out Dorn’s case against the Truman administration begins: “In April 1952, Victor Paz Estenssoro’s *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) launched what came to be known as the National Revolution in Bolivia, ousting the corrupt old order dominated by feudal landowners and ruthless tin barons (the *rosca*) and ushering in a new era in South America’s poorest nation.” (233) As a bolivianist, I find the contradiction between this opening statement and Dorn’s thesis intriguing because it suggests that if Truman’s foreign policy had been more effective, feudalism and domination by ruthless tin barons might have continued, and that by failing so miserably Truman’s policies helped trigger long-overdue changes. This observation far from negates Dorn’s criticisms of the Truman administration’s mistakes nor does it remove culpability for the administration’s inability to mediate the bureaucratic and other conflicts that left its policies so disjointed. But it does reveal a central paradox in U.S. policy in the region that raises interesting and important questions for both Latin Americanists and diplomatic historians.

The paradox is as follows When U.S. hemispheric policy is considered most ‘effective’ and ‘successful’ (think 1939-1945 or 1985-2000), it is often most hegemonic and neocolonial. Dorn notes that “by dismantling the International Tin Agreement in the name of

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<sup>3</sup> NA: Office Files of the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Edward G. Miller (1949-1953), Statement of W. Stuart Symington before the Preparedness Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, 24 July 1951 and the Johnson quote in Dorn, 250.

<sup>4</sup> NA: 724.00 (W)/10-2750, 27 October 1950 and NA 724.00 (W)/11-350, 3 November 1950.

<sup>5</sup> NA: Miller Files, Letter, Florman to Truman, 19 April 1951.

liberalized commerce and creating its own purchasers' monopoly in the name of national self interest, the Truman administration imposed a neocolonial dependency more onerous than any Bolivia had yet endured." (258) He is right about the contradiction; but what Dorn's research so effectively demonstrates is that during the *sexenio* this neocolonial dependency was imposed so inconsistently and so ineffectively that, in a sense, it was not neocolonial at all and the result was the revolution of April 1952. Then, to their credit, Truman policymakers responded with sufficient flexibility and knowledge to find a *modus vivendi* with the new regime.

Dorn concludes his article: "In the end, Truman's diplomats and economic planners had only helped to precipitate the very revolution they had long dreaded." (258) In fact, the most astute observers of Bolivia in the Truman State Department—and there *were* some—no longer dreaded that revolution as they once might have. During World War II, Washington had feared the MNR, its fascist leanings, its economic nationalism, and its perceived anti-Semitism. But during the *sexenio* the MNR increased its popular support, won an election that was clearly weighted to keep it from power, and saw its persuasive critique of tin baron greed and government fecklessness reinforced in the daily news and by men like Symington and Johnson. Each capitulation to the RFC or to mine owners, each labor strike, each rumor that revolution loomed revealed weaknesses in the *sexenio* governments that reinforced the MNR's mystique and led State Department and Embassy observers to reevaluate the party.

Reflecting the tendencies of post-Cold War historiography, Dorn downplays the issue of communism and states that "the central tenet of U.S. diplomacy in South America in the immediate postwar period was the promotion of a liberal capitalist economic order [that suppressed] economic nationalism." (234) But communism became increasingly important to the Truman administration as the *sexenio* progressed. While it is true that the Cordell Hull State Department focused heavily on thwarting economic nationalism in the hemisphere as David Green and others have persuasively argued, the Dean Acheson State Department was far less fixated on that issue and instead saw the hemisphere increasingly in strategic terms defined by the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> The declining importance of market liberalism as a U.S. diplomatic 'first-principle' continued into the Dulles State Department when conservative Republicans paid above-market prices to the new state mining company (COMIBOL) and initiated an extraordinary program of aid to support MNR nationalists against perceived threats from the internationalist Marxist labor-left. On the issue of communism, the Truman State Department was increasingly reassured by the MNR's nationalism and rejected all attempts by *sexenio* governments to link the party to communism. A 1950 Embassy survey of Communism in Bolivia called the MNR, along

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<sup>6</sup> David Green. *The Containment of Latin America: Myths and Realities of the Good Neighbor Policy* (Chicago, 1971). James Siekmeier applies this perspective to his study of U.S. policy in Bolivia: James Siekmeier, *Aid, Nationalism, and Inter-American Relations—Guatemala, Bolivia, and the United States, 1945-1961* (New York, 1990).

with the Army, key factors "limiting the chances for full development of a Communist movement" in Bolivia. The survey further speculated that, even if political expediency briefly drove the MNR and the newly founded Bolivian Communist Party together as conservative politicians were charging, it "would be only a matter of time before the MNR would turn against its erstwhile allies and liquidate them."<sup>7</sup> Nationalism, even economic nationalism, was not so anathema to the State Department as it had been right after the war.

The MNR's victory in 1951 impressed the Truman State Department which, while giving a green light to the Mamertazo, understood the limited appeal of 'democracy' that gave barely 100,000 in a population of three million the right to participate. A week before the April 1952 revolution the Embassy sent a lengthy dispatch to Washington titled "The Bolivian Dilemma". Probably prepared to brief incoming Ambassador Sparks, the document pinned the blame for Bolivia's continuing poverty on the corrupt inefficiencies of *sexenio* governments and the rigid self-interested inflexibility of the tin barons. The document came far short of endorsing the MNR but it clearly reveals that the Embassy was coming to terms with a now nearly inevitable MNR coup. The Embassy's ambivalent view of the MNR is perhaps summarized by an exasperated comment in a January 1952 dispatch to Washington that noted the Junta's continued fratricidal squabbles worked only to the advantage of the MNR—"an advantage ... fraught with terrible possibilities."<sup>8</sup>

When these terrible possibilities became reality, the Truman State Department responded, neither with its typical confusion nor with historic neocolonial rigidity but rather with a flexibility and restraint that opened the way to real and significant change in Bolivia. This is the sweet-spot of U.S. hemispheric diplomacy—neither disinterested nor hegemonic, but rather inquisitive and pragmatic—and it more often results from failure than success. Sometimes, perhaps, U.S. policies in the hemisphere can best succeed by failing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> NA: 724.001/3-3050, 29 March, 1950, "Survey of Communism in Bolivia." 3/29/50.

<sup>8</sup> NA: 824.00/4-252, Dispatch 696, "Bolivian Dilemma," 2 April 1952 and NA: 724.00/1-1052, Dispatch 523 from La Paz, 10 January 1952.

<sup>9</sup> I am fascinated by this paradox because my own recent research on the inconsistent and ultimately ineffective policies of the George W. Bush administration in Bolivia suggest that its failings opened the way to the 2005 election of Evo Morales. The book is far from closed on Morales but along with the 1952 revolution his election can be seen as another significant step in Bolivia's socio-political development and self-discovery. If so, these are also steps in the creation of a more friendly and equitable hemispheric community instead of one rooted in dependency. As the tools of U.S. hegemony weaken, this is important. See Ken Lehman, "Medicine of Death?" in *Addicted to Failure: U.S. Security Policy in Latin America and the Andean Region*, editor Brian Loveman (Rowman and Littlefield 2006).

*States: A Limited Partnership* as well as various articles on the 1952 revolution and current U.S.-Bolivian relations. His current project is to study the phenomenon of *cholita* wrestling as an indicator of cultural and political change in the Bolivia of Evo Morales.

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