
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

AT UNION'S BRINK: Ideals and Problems in Restoring the United Provinces of Central America, 1920–1922*

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The Provincias Unidas del Centro de América (later called the Federación de la América Central) lasted from 1824 to 1838. Despite the various reasons for the union's disintegration in 1838, the dream of reunification has resurfaced at least twenty-five times. Geography, three hundred years of colonial union, and what Thomas Karnes has termed "more bonds of similarity than any other small group of nations" have all made the region of Central America an obvious candidate for unification.¹

The literature on the topic consistently points to an episode in the 1920s as coming closest to realizing the dream. Historian Richard Salisbury surmised, "perhaps at no other time in Central American experience were conditions more propitious for the achievement than during the 1920–21 period." Former Guatemalan Minister of Foreign Affairs Alberto Herrarte characterized this effort as "the most important attempt at federation." Historians John Findling and Kenneth Grieb have described the outlook in those days as "brighter than usual" and "entirely fresh." Participant Dana Gardner Munro, the State Department's Central American

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1. Thomas L. Karnes, *The Failure of Union: Central America, 1824–1975* (Tempe: Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, 1976), 3.

specialist in the 1920s, reported that “the restoration of the federal republic . . . [and] the prospect for success seemed brighter than on previous occasions.”² What transpired in the 1920s to bring the Central American states to the brink of unification? And why did this propitious moment fail to produce the long-desired union?

El Partido Unionista: “Fresh Minds, Virgin Hearts”

Several attempts were made to unify Central America politically in the 1880s and 1890s. Out of these trials and errors emerged a new approach: the Partido Unionista Centroamericano, which was founded in July 1899 in Guatemala City. Unlike other organizations in the Central American political experience that were all too often dominated by aristocratic families, landed gentry, and the military, this group was formed by a small group of university students under the leadership of Nicaraguan intellectual Salvador Mendieta. The new party was founded to show how Central American unity could be the best possible response to three regional concerns: the imminent position of power of the United States in the region following its victory in the Spanish-American-Cuban War, the demise of José Santos Zelaya’s dream of La República Mayor and the effect on isthmian harmony, and the regional economic crisis of the 1890s.³

For Mendieta and his Unionist followers, working for the federation of Central America was what he envisioned as a “civic crusade to awaken the conscience of the Central American people” to the goals and ideals of unity. The Unionistas viewed the potential outcomes of a united isthmus as peace, social justice, and the advancement of culture and civilization.⁴ But the different way in which they advocated these ideals distinguished these party members from past proponents of unification.

The uniqueness of the movement is reflected in the words of its founder and in the party’s guidelines as well as in the historical record. Mendieta urged that “the noble task” be carried out in the spirit and practice of nonviolent action. His method for pursuing these goals was for the Unionistas “to lay down military arms and pick up the weapons of the press and peaceful meetings.” Historian Thomas Karnes has hailed the

2. Richard V. Salisbury, “Costa Rica and the 1920–21 Union Movement: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 19, no. 3 (Aug. 1977):394; Alberto Herrarte, *La unión de Centroamérica: Tragedia y esperanza* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1963), 193; John Findling, *Close Neighbors, Distant Friends: U.S.–Central American Relations* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 75; Kenneth J. Grieb, “The United States and the Central American Federation,” *The Americas* 24, no. 2 (Oct. 1967):107; and Dana Gardner Munro, *The United States and the Caribbean Republics, 1921–1933* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 119.

3. Salvador Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista de Centroamérica* (Barcelona: Maucci, 1934), 25.

4. *Ibid.*, 26.

"novelty of attempting confederation by means of a modern peace machinery" as a "refreshingly new approach" in the history of Central American efforts at unification.⁵ The fact that the party was initiated by students steeped in enlightened values and philosophical visions regarding the future well-being of the region testifies to the novelty and vigor of this approach. Seeking a sense of regional identity, Mendieta asked his followers:

Are we inferior to the Japanese, who suppressed fragmentary feudalism and thus assured the national unity of Nippon that the world so admires today? Are we inferior to the Chinese, who despite thousands of years of decadence . . . reacted with democratic institutions? Are we inferior to the Turks, who . . . buried their dead Islamic ideas and converted their land into a democracy palpitating with life and national pride? We are men like these . . . ; we form the golden chain of nations constituted by the Iberoamerican race; we occupy the center of the world; . . . this is your task, youth of Central America; it is indeed a labor of fresh minds and virgin hearts.⁶

The guidelines of the Partido Unionista outlined their strategy, while the preamble set the tone: "With resolute, tireless, and invincible will and faithful to our own selves, we Unionistas . . . represent the interests of the Central American people." The party's platform was unique in many ways. Recognizing that a serious flaw marring previous attempts at confederation was the lack of a federal district for the capital city, Unionistas wrote Article V, which delineated establishment of such a zone in Guatemala City. To further avoid the jealousies surrounding the capital being located there, Article V "federalized" San José, Costa Rica, "in order to recommend that it become the Geneva of the Western Hemisphere."⁷

More important, the guidelines of the Partido Unionista completely regrouped and renamed the provinces of the federation. Articles VI–VIII carved nineteen sections and a federal district out of the five traditional states of Central America. These new departments followed geographical boundaries more closely in an effort to break down what Ralph Lee Woodward has called "the traditional regional loyalties."⁸ Article VIII explained that the idea was "to resolve in favor of consolidating nationalism [and] harmonizing the regional variety within the collective whole." It was not for "the old cacique generations, whose rotten wine-skins no longer hold any new wine."⁹ Referred to as a "scientific" or "sophisticated" approach to regional integration, the guidelines com-

5. *Ibid.*, 27; and Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 204.

6. Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista*, 455–56.

7. "Propósitos del Partido Unionista Centroamericano," as printed in Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista*, 448–49.

8. Ralph Lee Woodward, *Central America, A Nation Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 172.

9. "Propósitos," in Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista*, 451.

bined geographically similar or thinly populated areas (such as the Misquito Coast) while dividing other regions into smaller departments (as in central and southern Guatemala). They established capitals for each department (usually the largest cities) and included what Karnes called “a neat bit of gerrymandering” to place traditionally rival cities like León and Granada in separate districts.¹⁰ The name of the new country was to be the República Federal de Centroamérica. Although it never materialized, the proposed new country laid the groundwork for future changes in the political face of the region.

Although the Unionistas were always a minority party, their message promoting reunification, greater freedom of the press, improved courts of justice, and the inalienable right to assemble—all within a framework eschewing intrigue and the use of armed force—quickly attracted members throughout Central America and led key political figures in each state to espouse the movement. The party’s rolls also increased after the Central American Court of Justice collapsed in 1917, as a result of Nicaragua’s refusal to abide by the court’s ruling on the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty. Central Americans had become disgusted with the lack of regional cohesion. Moreover, the approaching centenary of independence from Spain (on 15 September 1921) loomed as a prominent stimulus for talks on reunification, an occasion adeptly exploited by the Partido Unionista.

The impact of this new regional movement was manifested in political changes in the early 1920s. Costa Ricans in 1920 elected as president Julio Acosta, the first “admittedly Unionista” candidate since 1850.¹¹ More profound was the role played by the Partido Unionista in the 1920 downfall of Guatemalan dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who had held office since 1898 and avowed his wish to die there. Mendieta inveighed, “For twenty-two long years, Guatemala groaned under the infamous regime . . . of this implacable tyrant, who used sadistic cruelty worse than that of Tiberius or Nero. . . .”¹²

A major party leader in Guatemala was Clemente Marroquín Rojas. His 1929 account of the Partido Unionista in Guatemala recalled that the

10. Woodward, *Central America*, 172; Salisbury, “Costa Rica and the Union Movement,” 395; and Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 206. Karnes concluded that “aside from its obvious merits and equally obvious impossibilities, the plan probably afforded the students many pleasurable hours of discussion and map making.”

11. Salisbury, “Costa Rica and the Union Movement,” 395. See also Richard V. Salisbury, *Costa Rica y el istmo, 1900–1934* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1984). Here Salisbury doubts the sincerity of Acosta’s pro-union rhetoric, arguing that at best, Acosta was a Unionista only in “a very secondary way” and much more of a “fervent Costa Rican nationalist” (p. 43).

12. Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista*, 99. In another book, Mendieta describes Estrada Cabrera as a symptom of isthmian political sickness, “a product of either the worst congenital or the worst acquired qualities of the Central American people. He became a catalyst for union, not a means but an end.” See Mendieta, *La enfermedad de Centroamérica* (Barcelona: Maucci, 1934), 28.

"noble and beautiful idea of union" was the basis of forming student activist chapters (of the Club Unionista de Estudiantes) throughout the country: "Within us, the idea of Central Americanism burns with the true flame of passion, and on seeing this adored Homeland, this virgin Central America endangered by the ogre of the North, we can do no less than protest with all the force of our souls."¹³

The party's ideals also appealed to a broad cross-section of Guatemalan society—from members of the liberal upper class and the landed coffee elite to urban artisans and indigenous peoples in remote parts of the country. Wade Kitt's recent study of the "Unionist experiment in Guatemala" argued that this combination of efforts indicated the "change in the social and economic fabric of Guatemalan society," exactly the kind of social diversity the party had hoped to attract.¹⁴

Party members launched a propaganda campaign against Estrada Cabrera calling for reinstatement of civil liberties in Guatemala. In April 1920, the Guatemalan Assembly met, declared the dictator insane, and forced him to resign. Karnes concluded that "the guiding hands" of the "relatively peaceful" revolution were those of the Partido Unionista.¹⁵ The new Guatemalan president, Carlos Herrera, was a devoted Unionista, a party member, and thus a symbol of hope for Mendieta and his movement. The momentum intensified in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, and in June 1920, the Salvadoran government proposed a pan-regional conference to discuss the theme of unity. The Partido's role in this historic development cannot be understated.

The San José Conference: "El momento anhelado"

With the centenary of Central American independence fast approaching, isthmian leaders convened the Conferencia de Plenipotenciarios Centroamericanos in December 1920 in San José, Costa Rica (a site possibly selected to encourage the sluggish Costa Ricans to join the Unionista movement). Two delegates from each of the five states met at the Carnegie Temple, seat of the defunct Central American Court of Justice. The proceedings were headed by Alejandro Alvarado, foreign relations minister of Costa Rica, with Alberto Uclés, foreign minister of Honduras, serving as the vice-chair.

The primary order of business was to reestablish a Central American federation. Prior to the meeting, Costa Rican delegate Cleto González Viquez had drafted a proposal for union as a basis for discussion. The

13. C. Marroquín Rojas, *Historia del movimiento unionista*, vol. 1 (Barcelona: R. Llauger, 1929), 87, 77.

14. Wade Kitt, "The Unionist Experiment in Guatemala, 1920–21," *The Americas* 50, no. 1 (July 1993):32. See also Vincent Peloso, "The Politics of Federation, 1885–1921," Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1969.

15. Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 211.

proposal never included a geographic breakup of the states like that suggested by Mendieta and his followers but employed similarly grandiose rhetoric on the ideals of unity. The preamble to the Pacto de Unión evoked the “esteemed and high patriotic duty to realize the reconstruction of the República Federal de Centroamérica.”¹⁶ At the session on 10 January 1921, Guatemalan delegate Carlos Salazar emphasized that if “the union were created, Central America would have more than five million inhabitants and an area larger than Great Britain, France, or Italy; [it] could successfully experience the fullness of modern life because modernism is wealth, production, industrial and commercial power, the ability to transform natural resources, the cultivation of arts, the rule of science, the infinite thirst for perfection—it is everything great in the human condition.”¹⁷

Such was the nature of the discussion of the merits of unity. The delegates drafted a pact to “unite in perpetual and indissoluble union” the five republics under the same name as the Constitution of 1824, the Federación de la América Central. The outlook seemed bright for *el anhelado momento* dreamt of for so long by Mendieta and the Partido Unionista.¹⁸ Delegates from all five nations were seated at the table of unity, more government leaders in Central America were supporting the cause than at any other time since 1824, peace reigned in the region, and dictatorial tyranny seemed to be on temporary leave. The strong Partido Unionista represented a wide cross-section of the population, and the Pacto de Unión of 1921 was drafted in a spirit of compromise reflecting diverse regional considerations. In sum, as Central America hovered on the brink of renewing its confederated status, “*el anhelado momento*” seemed right around the corner. The corner yet to be turned, however, was ratification of the pact.

The Familiar Face of Failure: “Death in the Cradle”

All was not smooth sailing at the San José conference. Despite the appealing rhetoric on the ideals of unity, the conference deadlocked over Nicaragua’s stance taken in the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty. In 1913 the United States and Nicaragua had entered into an agreement allowing the United States to maintain the rights to construct a trans-isthmian canal through Nicaragua. Although the Panama Canal was nearly complete (it opened in 1914), the United States was keeping its options open in the region and continuing its policy of intervening in the internal affairs of Nicaragua—

16. “Pacto de Unión,” in the proceedings, *Conferencia de Plenipotenciarios Centroamericanos San José, Costa Rica, 4 diciembre 1920–19 enero 1921* (Guatemala City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1921), 3.

17. Carlos Salazar, in *Conferencia de Plenipotenciarios* (proceedings), 32.

18. “Pacto de Unión,” in *Conferencia de Plenipotenciarios*, 4; and Mendieta, *Alrededor del problema unionista*, 457.

and not without the tacit approval, even request, of the Nicaraguan government. In 1912 President Adolfo Díaz, who had strong ties to U.S. commerce, had requested U.S. military assistance from the William Taft administration to protect his presidency. He also appointed his rival Emiliano Chamorro as ambassador to the United States.¹⁹ Chamorro and William Jennings Bryan, U.S. Secretary of State in the first two years of the Woodrow Wilson administration, drafted a treaty in 1914 allowing for U.S. canal and military rights “in perpetuity” in exchange for three million dollars, money sorely needed to shore up the sagging Nicaraguan economy. Because of legislative delays and other pressing world events (such as the war in Europe), neither country’s legislature ratified the treaty until April 1916. Historian Thomas Bailey has explained, “the negotiators felt that the cash payment would hasten the end of financial chaos . . . and that the option would further stabilize conditions in Nicaragua.” In reality, however, half of the three million never arrived in Nicaragua but went directly to the New York banks that had sold loans to the Nicaraguan government. According to Bailey’s estimate, Nicaragua received only about 30 percent of the total.²⁰

Moreover, the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty (or the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty in Central American literature) directly violated provisions of the Washington Peace Conference held in 1907, which guaranteed each Central American nation free use of the territorial waters of sister republics. The government of Costa Rica vehemently protested the treaty because such a canal would use the San Juan River (the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua) without awarding rights to Costa Rica. Similarly, El Salvador and Honduras protested because they feared U.S.-Nicaraguan domination of the Gulf of Fonseca (the Pacific outlet of the proposed canal) and because the United States had not purchased rights for use of Salvadoran and Honduran waters. The protesting countries took their grievances to the Central American Court of Justice, which ruled in their favor but pointed out that it had no jurisdiction over the United States.

19. Chamorro’s appointment was part of a deal arranged in part by the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua in 1912. For more information, see Emiliano Chamorro, “Autobiografía,” *Revista Conservador del Pensamiento Centroamericano* 14 (Apr. 1966):1–119; or Gary Schilmoeller, “The Role of Emiliano Chamorro in Nicaraguan Politics during the Second Conservative Republic,” M.A. thesis, University of Kansas, 1969.

20. See Thomas A. Bailey, “Interest in a Nicaraguan Canal, 1903–1931,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (Feb. 1936):3, 7. Bailey discussed some of the intrigue that hastened the treaty’s ratification in the U.S. Congress, including rumors that Chamorro was offered nine million dollars by the German government for the canal rights and that Canada was preparing to build a trans-isthmian railroad. The U.S. Senate passed the bill to ratify the treaty but not without loud opposition from isolationists like William Borah of Idaho and Elihu Root of New York, who objected to doing business with a corrupt Nicaraguan government kept in power by U.S. Marines. “All in all,” Bailey concluded, the treaty “is not one that the United States can review with any degree of pride” (p. 12). It was abrogated in 1971 by President Richard Nixon.

Nicaraguan officials decried the court's decision, claiming that the treaty represented canal options only, not another canal to be built anytime soon. Conservative apologist Toribio Tijerino explained, "the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty is but a simple option. When the North Americans decide to construct the canal, the definitive treaty will be enacted." Secretary Bryan responded to the Costa Ricans by promising them that when the time came for the actual construction, the United States would probably consult the Costa Rican government.²¹

The facts that Nicaragua had failed to honor the Court of Justice's 1916 ruling to abandon the treaty and that the Wilson administration had supported Nicaragua in ignoring the court were still fresh in the minds of the conferees in 1920. Some officials were surprised that Nicaragua even sent delegates, an act that raised hopes that a spirit of compromise would prevail over a successful meeting.

That hope was short-lived. Early in the conference, the Nicaraguan delegates protested the lack of provision for U.S. canal rights through their country. Costa Rican, Salvadoran, and Honduran delegates argued their traditional lines of grievance against the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, leading to a near stalemate of the conference. Prior to a recess for the holidays in 1920, Costa Rica proposed a compromise on the issue, but the Nicaraguan delegation rejected it on orders from Emiliano Chamorro, now president of Nicaragua.

When the conference reconvened on 3 January 1921, Nicaragua sent but one delegate—and he with instructions from Chamorro to accept no proposal for union without a provision for U.S. canal rights (even though Emiliano's uncle Diego was to assume the presidency that same year). A telegram from Emiliano Chamorro to the conference stated, "without any kind of doubt, [I am] sincerely unionist." But it went on to extol the benefits of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, without mention of which Nicaragua would honor no pact of unification.²² When Costa Rica's González Viquez criticized this unwillingness to compromise, the debate overheated and the conference nearly collapsed once more. Finally, Guatemalan delegate Salvador Falla suggested a new compromise that would allow Bryan-Chamorro to stand as long as two other clauses were included in the pact: a statement from the U.S. Senate regarding its reservations about Bryan-Chamorro, and language upholding the sovereign rights of Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras in the construction of any canal using the San Juan River or the Gulf of Fonseca. All the *plenopotenciarios* accepted this change, but the Nicaraguan government refused to honor its delegate's acceptance. The pact was then signed on 17 Janu-

21. Toribio Tijerino, *El Tratado Bryan-Chamorro y sus proyecciones en la América Central* (pamphlet), 31; and Bailey, "Interest in a Nicaraguan Canal," 10.

22. *Conferencia de Plenopotenciarios* (proceedings), 45.

ary by all conferees except the Nicaraguan delegate, who had already walked out of the meeting.

The comments of the Honduran delegates at the 10 January session may best reflect the nature of the Pacto de San José. Mariano Vásquez proclaimed, "all local interest should be replaced by the greater interests of Central America," and Alberto Uclés avowed the full support of Hondurans for the spirit of compromise in seeking to reunite the isthmus.²³ The pact included language for each state to preserve its autonomy and independence in internal affairs. It further created the Provisional Federal Council (with delegates from each state) to draft a constitution in time for the centennial date of 15 September 1921. The pact also included an article welcoming Nicaragua into the pact should that nation's government rethink its decision not to join the union. The conference closed officially on 19 January. Chairman Alejandro Alvarado addressed the final session: "This pact is the result of a deliberate and sensible discussion, it contains all possible concessions to conciliate the diverse interests, [and] it guards under a sacred arc the principle of National Sovereignty."²⁴

At this point, each country's legislature had to ratify the pact. In Honduras, the pact's signing was greeted throughout the country "with great rejoicing," according to a report by U.S. legation officer Willing Spencer to U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes: "now more than ever [Hondurans] are very strongly in favor of union."²⁵ Because the Nicaraguan representative did not sign the pact for his country, the Nicaraguan Assembly never debated it, but the document was ratified readily in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala by April 1921.

The pact ran into significant trouble in Costa Rica, however. Strong anti-union sentiment there was fueled by an aggressive media campaign. Costa Rican journalist Vicente Sáenz (an earlier proponent of unification) criticized Nicaragua's refusal to support the pact. An editorial on 11 January 1921 in Sáenz's *La Prensa* called Nicaragua's decision "an insolent blow to decorum and dignity." It went on to charge that the Nicaraguan government was not interested in "liberty for its people" and was "deaf to all calls for harmony and blind to the light of hope that is being offered at this time to the people who crave growth. . . ." ²⁶ Days later, *La Prensa* labeled the Nicaraguan delegates "traitors" who worked for a "'government' that had delivered the homicidal machete wound to the bowels of a high ideal" and "turned their backs by order of their government on the greatest and most transcendental idea that had manifested itself . . . for

23. *Ibid.*, 71, 59.

24. *Ibid.*, 108.

25. Spencer to Hughes, 26 Jan. 1921, U.S. Department of State (hereafter USSD), Records Relating to Central America, 1910–1929, decimal file 813.00/1055.

26. "La respuesta de Nicaragua es lo mismo que un insolente bofetón al decoro y a la dignidad," *La Prensa*, 11 Jan. 1921, p. 3.

celebrating the Centennial of national independence."²⁷ Such vituperative attacks prompted First Secretary of the Nicaraguan delegation, Enrique Chamorro, to request permission from Managua to resign in order to challenge Sáenz to a duel. A U.S. State Department official in San José reported, "Mr. Chamorro's request was refused and thus far nothing has come of the incident."²⁸

But the media row reflected many Costa Ricans' fears that the United States was becoming altogether too dominant in the region, given the U.S. presence next door in Panama and recent interventions in Nicaragua. *La Prensa* referred to Costa Rica's geopolitical position as "a sandwich"—squeezed between the "Saxon imperialism [of] North American bankers, the true owners of Nicaragua," and the U.S. Canal Zone in Panama.²⁹ *El Diario del Comercio*, another San José daily, was more succinct: "Costa Rica remains isolated between two oceans and two canals."³⁰ Both papers drew comparisons between the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty and Nicaragua's complicity with the U.S. filibuster experience of 1855–1856. *La Prensa* called the pact's Bryan-Chamorro compromise "a true sacrifice" for a majority of Nicaraguans and the "brother peoples" of the region for the sake of the "cynical puppets of Washington, the Punches of Wall Street, and the victimizers . . . of this unfortunate isthmus."³¹ In yet another editorial, *La Prensa* blamed the "Wall Street bankers [and] the farcical Managuan government" for putting "a smile on 'Tío Samuel' and who knows how many thousands of dollars into the pockets of the new Judas Iscariots."³² Certainly, Costa Ricans had reason to fear U.S. economic penetration too near their borders, and they consequently scoffed at the idea of a united Central America with something as divisive as the Bryan-Chamorro compromise built into the pact.

Yet ratification of the pact still enjoyed considerable support in the Costa Rican National Assembly. The U.S. legation reported to the State Department in May 1921 that "recent changes of opinion among [Assembly] members improve the chances of ratification."³³ President Julio Acosta spoke to the deputies, urging their support. The issue was referred to a committee, which later presented a majority report favoring ratification and a minority report opposing it. But the debate in the Assembly grew intense that summer, and at times acrimonious. Richard Salisbury re-

27. See "Baldón caiga sobre los traidores," *La Prensa*, 17 Jan. 1921, p. 3; and "Ante la defeción de Nicaragua los otros estados se unen y formarán la Federación de Centroamérica," 20 Jan. 1921, p. 2.

28. John F. Martin to Hughes, 31 Dec. 1920, USSD, Records 813.00/104.

29. "Ante la defeción de Nicaragua," *La Prensa*, 20 Jan. 1921, p. 2.

30. "Como pensamos: El pacto," *El Diario del Comercio*, 21 Jan. 1921, p. 2.

31. "La respuesta de Nicaragua," *La Prensa*, 11 Jan. 1921, p. 3.

32. "Baldón caiga sobre los traidores," *La Prensa*, 17 Jan. 1921, p. 3. See also Arthur Warner, "Guatemala: Our Blow to Pan-Americanism," *The Nation* 114, no. 2,972 (21 June 1922):745–46.

33. Walter C. Thurston to Hughes, 28 May 1921, USSD, Records 813.00/1077.

ported, "in a supposedly dramatic gesture, the deputies drew a heavy black line across the page to symbolize 'the barriers that reality often places in the way of high expectations.'"³⁴ The minority report charged that because many Costa Ricans opposed the pact and the other four countries lacked unanimity, Costa Rica was not ready for Central American integration. Hence the Assembly rejected the Pacto de Unión by a vote of nineteen to twenty (far fewer votes than the two-thirds majority required by law).

Some historians have interpreted Nicaragua's rejection as merely "a pretext for the Costa Rican legislature" to veto the pact.³⁵ Yankeeophobia (especially distrust of U.S. politicking over the canal) and a tradition of Costa Rican isolationism may have been the underlying sentiments of the Tico congress. A venerated figure in the anti-union camp was former President Ricardo Jiménez, whom Salisbury has characterized as "a brilliant polemist . . . [and] defender of Costa Rican isolationism."³⁶ Jiménez believed that the United States would not modify its stance on Bryan-Chamorro and that Costa Rica should join a federated union only if it proved to be a workable entity over a prolonged period of time. Karnes concluded that the "wait-and-see" approach and the use of Nicaragua as a scapegoat probably constituted a fair reflection of the Tico mentality, which preferred federation solely "in the abstract."³⁷

Meanwhile, despite their evident disappointment with Nicaragua and Costa Rica, leaders in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras went ahead with plans to create a united republic. In mid-summer of 1921, the Provisional Council convened in Tegucigalpa. The delegates elected Honduran President Policarpo Bonilla, an avid supporter of the República Mayor in the 1890s, as provisional presiding officer of what became known as the Constitutional Assembly. They also elected Salvador Mendieta as secretary. Unionista stalwart Alberto Uclés, also named as an officer, wired the important intent of the Assembly to the U.S. government: "[The] Council makes known its solemn installation to the chancelleries of the mother country, Spain, of the elder sister of the continent, the United States . . . , and of the other nations of the world, also urging the government of Nicaragua to join. . . ."³⁸ The Provisional Council continued to urge Costa Rica to affiliate with the new federation. According to a State Department memo from the U.S. legation in San José, a "special mission" of staunch Guatemalan Unionistas traveled to Costa Rica "to foment

34. Salisbury, "Costa Rica and the Union Movement," 407.

35. Alberto Herrarte, *El federalismo en Centro América* (Guatemala City: José de Pineda Ibarra, 1972), 66.

36. Salisbury, "Costa Rica and the Union Movement," 411.

37. Salisbury, *Costa Rica y el istmo*, 50–52; and Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 215.

38. Uclés to Hughes, 16 June 1921, in USSD, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1921*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938), 155 (hereafter cited as *Papers 1921*).

union." The Costa Rican government sent word that if Nicaragua would take action, then Costa Rica would reconsider—a promise that Karnes called "meaningless . . . but good for the record."³⁹

By the end of August, the new "country" had chartered a constitution, recommissioned the original flag and coat of arms of 1823, and designated Tegucigalpa as the federal capital district (the capital of Honduras reverted to Comayagua). Excitement was mounting for the birthday celebration of what was to be called the República de América Central, scheduled to take place on that memorable day, 15 September 1921. At this time, Council Secretary F. Martínez Suárez telegraphed the U.S. Secretary of State in order to notify him that the "Council cherishes the most confident hope that its representatives will be received by the government of Your Excellency with that high spirit of justice and cordiality that it has always shown to the American peoples. . . ." ⁴⁰ The council sent a commission to Washington to seek recognition from the United States, believing official recognition to be the key to the federation's success.

The top officials in the U.S. State Department's Latin America Division, Sumner Welles and Dana Gardner Munro, at first urged the government to support the new union. This recommendation upheld basic State Department policy that had consistently advocated federation throughout the nineteenth century (with the exception of the policies of Secretary of State William Seward in the 1860s). President Wilson, however, opposed Central American union, fearing that a unified nation would turn anti-American. This scenario was to be avoided at all costs due to the strategic importance of the Panama Canal, especially during that time when international war seemed imminent. Similarly, the government of Mexico had actively supported those opposing union in Central America, notably during the rule of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911). Having always felt threatened by a unified nation to the south, Mexico was not keen on the idea now.⁴¹

Wilson's stance shaped policy, and his last Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, opposed unification until Warren Harding was sworn in as president in 1921. Welles continued to voice support for the union, and President Harding and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes agreed to reexamine the policy. Welles believed that the federation's success would hinge on Washington's approval and that a united Central America would be in the best interest of U.S. businesses in the region, especially given that 80 percent of the region's trade was conducted with the United

39. Thurston to State Department, 8 Apr. 1921, USSD, Records 813.00/1068; and Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 218.

40. Martínez to Hughes, 15 Sept. 1921, in USSD, *Papers 1921*, 159.

41. For an excellent discussion of the Mexican stance toward Central American unity, see Peloso, "Politics of Federation." Peloso shows how the Mexican government sent emissaries to "mingle" with anti-unionistas (p. 99).

States. Welles also believed that the union would contribute to isthian political stability (centralized government would mean fewer revolutions) and would check Mexican influence in the region.⁴²

But State Department officials were not in complete agreement. Munro wrote later that other attempts at union had ended in bloodshed and that the department considered the situation just "too precarious" at this point to issue a statement of support. Benton McMillin, U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala, had earlier disavowed unconditional U.S. support for Guatemalan Unionista President Carlos Herrera to prevent creating the "impression that the United States was friendly" to the new government or supportive of the movement favoring union. The Undersecretary of State and a number of U.S. legation field officers in Central America were also opposed. Kenneth Grieb summarized their doubts: despite unification on the map, the same old problems of "inadequate transportation, nationalism, and lack of education" would persist and thwart political stability in the region (the true goal of U.S. foreign policy in Central America), all of which stalled U.S. recognition.⁴³

Thus the official policy of the new Harding administration became one of "wait and see," at least until the Provisional Council's elections took place in February 1922. Munro came to agree with this policy. He later recalled that recognition "was one of my first important matters I had to deal with . . . when I was assigned to the Central America Desk in 1921. I feared the success of the union was unlikely even with American support and thought we should be cautious in dealing with a project that might well end in civil or international war."⁴⁴ Munro remembered that the Provisional Council's commission to Washington never really pressed for recognition per se but rather for a statement of support. And after months of study, Secretary Hughes eventually indicated nominal verbal support, but official policy was to withhold recognition until the new government could prove itself.

Such was the state of international relations when a new development rang the death knell for the Republic of Central America: a coup d'état occurred on 5 December 1921 to oust Guatemalan Unionista President Carlos Herrera. Three high-ranking generals remaining from the Estrada Cabrera years (José María Orellana, Miguel Larrave, and José María Lima) took over the government, forced Herrera to resign, and took control of the capital. The triumvirate placed Orellana in the presi-

42. See Grieb, "U.S. and Central American Federation," 111–15.

43. Dana Gardner Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy, 1900–1921* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), 467, 460; and Grieb, "U.S. and Central American Federation," 112, 113. For a comprehensive work on Harding and Latin America, see Kenneth J. Grieb, *The Latin American Policy of Warren G. Harding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

44. Munro, *United States and Caribbean Republics*, 120.

gency, and he promptly appointed new Guatemalan representatives to the Provisional Council in Tegucigalpa. The council deemed the entire episode illegal and refused to accept the new Guatemalan delegates. Salvadoran and Honduran leaders discussed the idea of invading Guatemala to restore Herrera to the presidency, but Presiding Officer Policarpo Bonilla thought it wise to consult with the United States first. A review of State Department documents during this crisis reveals patterns of thinking that shed light on how the scenario unfolded.

Ambassador McMillin and the *chargé d'affaires* in Honduras both wired lengthy accounts regarding the Guatemalan coup to the U.S. State Department. On receiving this information, Dana Munro, now Acting Chief of the Latin America Division, sent a memo to Undersecretary H. P. Fletcher stressing the "urgent necessity to make representations to the Central American nations at once which will prevent the international situation from getting entirely beyond control." He viewed the situation as "exceedingly and increasingly serious."⁴⁵ Munro went on to discuss possible Salvadoran and Honduran military interventions "to save the new federation" and strongly recommended that a U.S. warship be dispatched to Puerto Barrios in case U.S. military assistance was needed to ensure peace in the region. In the meantime, the Provisional Council's commission in Washington picked up the pace in soliciting U.S. recognition of the federation and support of their cause against the Orellana regime. The chief of the Partido Unionista, R. Díaz Chávez, penned a memo to Munro imploring the United States to act on the federation's behalf: "The Unionist Party upholds the Federation at any cost and begs you to press recognition of the Republic."⁴⁶ Munro continued to advise his superiors of the situation and how he responded to the Unionistas' pleas: "I told them that I thought the Department could hardly decide its policy toward the Federation government until we know the attitude of the new Guatemalan authorities toward union. . . . It seems most probable that the present Union will break up as a result of the Guatemalan Revolution. Consequently, I believe that we should refrain from any statement of policy at present."⁴⁷

While Munro, Fletcher, McMillin, and other State Department figures grappled with the countries affected by the coup, Secretary Hughes directed an important communiqué to the U.S. *chargé* in Managua to advise the Nicaraguans that "the United States would view with the greatest of concern any attempt by one Central American country to interfere in the internal affairs of another . . . , [and we] feel that no lasting . . . union could be imposed by force."⁴⁸ Hughes based his decision on the

45. Munro to Fletcher, 9 Dec. 1921, USSD, *Papers 1921*, 120.

46. Díaz to Munro, 15 Dec. 1921, USSD, *Papers 1921*, 120.

47. Munro to Fletcher, 15 Dec. 1921, USSD, *Papers 1921*, 120.

48. Hughes to U.S. Embassy in Managua, 14 Dec. 1921, USSD, *Papers 1921*, 16.

conventions of the Washington Conference of 1907, which forbade signee nations to interfere in other countries' politics—a surprising stance given that the United States had violated the 1907 agreements by landing Marines in Nicaragua in 1911.

The Nicaraguans were comforted to know that force would not be tolerated on the isthmus to press the issue of joining the federation. More important, the communiqué gave the green light for Orellana in Guatemala to secede from the united republic, which he did on 14 January 1922. He then announced the restoration of Guatemalan autonomy, ran for president, and, as Karnes commented, “was elected by a preposterous majority.”⁴⁹

Where now were the Guatemalan Unionistas who had been so vocal only a year earlier? Despite the fiery passion of unionists like Clemente Marroquín Rojas, the university activist clubs, and the mutual interests that brought together diverse sectors of society to oust Estrada Cabrera, the Unionistas themselves never became a unified political force. Wade Kitt recounted, “almost from the outset, the diverse and frequently divisive individual components of the Unionist Party made any sort of cohesive and durable government practically impossible.” The powerful *cafetaleros*, not pleased with Herrera's hands-off policy toward the coffee industry or his devaluation of the Guatemalan peso (which decreased purchasing power abroad), threw their support to positivists like Orellana, who believed in orderly progress for economic growth. This stance translated into increased governmental aid for what Kitt calls the “Unholy Trinity”—the United Fruit Company, the United Fruit Steamship Company, and the International Railroad of Central America.⁵⁰

Staunch Unionistas were saddened and frustrated by this turn of events. In a 1922 article on the subject, Edward Perry shared part of a letter from a Guatemalan leader relating how he and his colleagues were “full of the greatest depression [over] the rupture of the . . . federation which this time seemed already converted into a Guatemalan reality.”⁵¹

Although the U.S. government took a wait-and-see approach for over four months to consider recognizing the federation (and never did), on the recommendation of McMillan, the State Department recognized the Orellana government in Guatemala within two months. This decision was significant in that Hughes broke with traditional State Department policy and his own previous commitments in support of union. Similarly, recognition of the Orellana government contradicted the spirit of the 1907 conventions that called for invoking the Tobar Doctrine, the signees' agreement that forbade official recognition of a government that came to

49. Karnes, *Failure of Union*, 221.

50. Kitt, “Unionist Experiment,” 34, 47.

51. Edward Perry, “Central American Union,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 5, no. 1 (Feb. 1922):49.

power by force or revolution. By this time, however, El Salvador and Honduras had realized the implausibility of remaining united. On 29 January 1922, three days before the federation was to have been officially inaugurated, the Provisional Council met in Tegucigalpa to dissolve what union was left between the two states. Thus ended the last experiment in the political unification of Central America.

Conclusion

The failure of the attempt in the 1920s to reunify Central America cannot be attributed to any single cause. Rather, a combination of factors coalescing in the early twentieth century precluded the union's success. The Bryan-Chamorro Treaty had left Nicaragua's neighbors feeling bitter and betrayed, a climate hardly conducive to successful regional diplomacy. Moreover, Nicaragua's intransigence in refusing to compromise on the issue seriously impeded the progress of the San José conference and the overall goals of unity. The U.S. position here (based on economic and geopolitical motives with canal plans utmost) sided with Nicaragua, alienated the other states, and hindered the unification momentum.

Costa Rica should perhaps bear a share of the blame for its historic isolationism and tepid involvement in the Unionista movement of 1920–1922. This sentiment actually is part of the larger picture of each Central American nation's innate sense of exaggerated nationalism stemming from the colonial years and peppered with regional jealousies and provincial distrust. The region's history of political instability is often viewed as the result of such sentiments and a reason for the seeming impossibility of unification.

Finally, the Orellana coup in Guatemala can be perceived as the coup de grace for the unification experiment in the early 1920s in severing one-third of the federation and causing the other two-thirds to dissolve. Yet serious questions must be asked as to why the United States acted so quickly to recognize the revolutionary government (in violation of the Tobar Doctrine), a response that greatly enhanced Orellana's legitimacy. What political or economic motives underlay this U.S. diplomatic move?

Since 1922, only fleeting references have been made to Central American federation. The *Tratado General de Paz y Amistad* was established in 1934, and Guatemala and El Salvador made brief overtures regarding uniting in 1947. Various proposals have been made since the 1950s to cooperate politically and economically. They include ODECA (the *Organización de Estados Centroamericanos*, 1955), CACM (the *Central American Common Market*, 1958–1969), CONDECA (the *Concilio de Defensa Centroamericana*, 1963–1970), SIECA (the *Secretaría de Integración Económica Centroamericana*, 1970s–1980s), and the *Central Ameri-*

can Parliament, 1980s–1990s.⁵² None of them, however, resulted in any tangible reunification of the five states. Lacking the zeal of the 1920s experience and perhaps recalling that serious but aborted attempt, they simply withered away.

52. Nonetheless, historian Steve Ropp has written that the times now seem favorable for a political reunification of the isthmus. He compared the region to Italy in the 1870s (when political unification of the Italian peninsula took place) and suggested that the same could be true for Central America—possibly by the year 2000. See Steve C. Ropp, “Waiting for Cavour: The Current Central American Crisis and Unification,” *Proceedings of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies* 12 (1985–1986), 109–18. But former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, who labored unsuccessfully to establish a Central American Parliament in the 1980s, predicted at a forum at the University of Kansas (held on 6 Apr. 1994) that reunification “is not possible by 2000 or by 2100.”

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