

## POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT IN VENEZUELA

*THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES IN POLITICS*. By WINFIELD J. BURGGRAAFF.  
(Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1972. Pp. 241. \$10.00).

*HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT: VENEZUELA*. By VICTOR E. CHILDERS.  
(Bloomington, Indiana: International Development Research Center, 1974. Pp. 185. \$4.00).

*DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP IN VENEZUELA, 1945–1958*. By GLEN L. KOLB. (New London: Connecticut College, 1974. Pp. 228. \$10.00).

The story of democracy in Venezuela is well known; the main events have been identified and described in detail, the more relevant and contradictory interpretations of these events have been argued repeatedly by Venezuelan scholars, and many foreign-language commentators have made these facts and interpretations available to an international audience. This being the case, one must evaluate any new contributions in terms of two criteria: Does the work utilize previously undetected or undisclosed materials?; Is there a need to revise the conventional wisdom as a result of the work?

Neither the Burggraaff nor the Kolb contributions seem to meet these criteria. Kolb starts his presentation with an old and familiar line: A better understanding of Latin America is vital to the survival of the (North) American way of life, and North American misunderstanding of Latin America is one of the reasons for the failure of democracy throughout the area (p. viii). This represents a normative orientation of bygone days which leads Kolb to put his emphasis on "the struggle between the emerging liberal-democratic forces and those of the conservative-personalist elements, and the influence of the U.S. State Department in the development of that struggle" (p. 191). Both the language utilized and the ideological premises that underlie it seem to have been borrowed from that group of early North American *raconteurs* of the "Venezuelan democratic revolution." In short, Liewen and Alexander could not have said it better,<sup>1</sup> which comes as no surprise when one realizes that, in a generational sense, Kolb is a member of that group.

Kolb's historiography is traditional; the emphasis is on description, and an orderly presentation of the facts makes the work readable. There is substantial utilization of archival sources and documentary evidence, but little or nothing to suggest that the author conducted background interviews with leading participants. There are numerous digressions in which Kolb castigates the State Department (pp. 61–63, 123–26), the Truman (p. 43) and Eisenhower (pp. 142–46) administrations, and North American oil firms (pp. 53–56). But he always stops

short of drawing the full implications of his judgments: Misunderstandings, ill-conceived national interest, and personality factors are offered to explain the policy failures of these administrations, State Department blunders, and oil company pressures. Kolb is probably no more perverse in this than in his naive attempts to demonstrate—as if it were relevant or necessary—that the *adecos* were not communistic. There are also farfetched comparisons of Pérez Jiménez, Pedro Estrada, and Vallenilla Lanz to Hitler, Goebbels, and Stalin. All these add up to a theoretical misconception of biblical dimensions and do not help the argument.

There is still much to say about Venezuelan democracy but, to borrow an expression from a well-known Venezuelan historian, *laburda concepción de un enfrentamiento del bien y del mal* does not add much.<sup>2</sup> Kolb's analysis cannot be recommended for its clarity or theoretical relevance, yet his presentation of the facts is acceptable for he has been able to separate partisan fiction from historical evidence, and he was able to see through the transparent apologies written to serve personal interests. It is only on such a limited and qualified basis that one could recommend this monograph to an undergraduate audience, although many will find Kolb's essay a nostalgic replay of the melodramatic arguments of the "struggle for democracy" interpretation of Latin American politics.

One aspect of Venezuelan democracy which is worth further examination is the political role of the military, and the transformation of that role during the last two decades. This is the topic of Winfield Burggraaff's book. His essay is launched from a solid theoretical premise: It is not difficult to demonstrate that Venezuelan civilians have always encouraged, at critical historical junctures, the military's involvement in politics (p. 3). Although the author offers his study as a contribution to the comparative analysis of military politics in the hemisphere, the virtual inaccessibility of unpublished military records and his limited success in interviewing military officers diminish the importance of his contribution. These limitations are advertised very early in the book, and signify an apology rather than a constraint on the author's willingness to generalize and reach conclusions on the basis of incomplete data.

Neither is Burggraaff immune to theoretical misconception. For instance, he describes the Medina Angarita regime as "liberal" (p. 33); characterizes the leaders of the Gómez military establishment as "armed bureaucrats" or "uniformed bureaucrats" without elaborating on the distinction (pp. 52–53); interprets the success of the Betancourt regime in dealing with four different military conspiracies during the *trienio* as a sign of the "weakness" of that regime (p. 92); and makes a foray into unfamiliar territory by describing the *rancherías* of Caracas as "slums" (p. 141).

Burggraaff makes good use of secondary sources (although Kolb is more thorough in this respect), but he does not follow a systematic pattern in weighing these different sources, his presentation lacks a focus, and he is not very critical in certain cases. For instance, he accepts in its entirety Rangel's description of Táchira in the 1890s as a "frontier" state (pp. 8–9), as well as Rangel's interpretation of the meaning of the 1958 revolt of General Castro León against the Larrazábal junta (pp. 179–85).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Burggraaff's middle-of-the-road interpretation

of the overthrow of Medina (p. 71) and the assassination of Delgado Chalbaud (pp. 122–23) leaves much to be desired. His statement that the Gallegos regime fell because “it had almost no support outside the AD party and its labor affiliates” (p. 109) is both superfluous and unacceptable.

But these are not as grave as his unwillingness to give the essay greater theoretical coherence. He states at the beginning of the book that he is only concerned with “describing and analyzing the political behavior of the Venezuelan officer corps” (p. 2) and that he was not interested in other internal or external aspects of the military institution. It is hard to see how anybody could deal with the topic in such a fashion, and the consequences of this decision are many and varied.

First, Burggraaff identifies many crucial aspects but fails to dwell on them at any length. Such is the case in his implicit contrast between the military policies of Betancourt, who definitely knew how to deal with the military, and Gallegos, who did not. In a concluding section the author remarks in almost casual fashion that in Venezuela’s history of unrest, military movements tended to be successful “when they confronted a ruler who was both intransigent in his attitude and weak in his own defense” and that they were unsuccessful “when they confronted official determination and resolute action” (p. 193). The explanation is incomplete and fails to capitalize on one of the more significant aspects of the subject: The institutional rivalry between the military and the national political parties.

Second, as a result of this conceptual imprecision, the author is forced to generalize on the basis of impressionistic and ad hoc criteria. He confesses to be unable to provide an answer for what motivated the Venezuelan military to intervene directly in politics between 1928 and 1958 (p. 195), and given the nature of his data one could not agree more. He utilizes the much-abused cleavage between “barracks officers” and “academy officers” as the main source of conflict within the military. This constitutes one of the weaker aspects of the monograph, the absence of any serious attempt to scrutinize the formation of cleavages in terms other than personalistic ambitions or generational differences. For instance, Burggraaff omits any comment on the split between Pérez Jiménez and the Vargas brothers over their attitude toward the trienio regime (p. 92). Nor is there any attempt to probe the relationship between Pérez Jiménez and Delgado Chalbaud, which has always been predicated on the respective strengths of the two men with civil supporters (Delgado) and the military (Pérez Jiménez).

Finally, a very important element does not receive sufficient emphasis in Burggraaff’s presentation as a result of his neglect of factors “outside” the military institution. The question of the relationship between the military and the national political parties is mentioned on a few occasions to lend support to the civil-military emphasis. However, near the end of the book, where he deals with events that occur on the eve of the military’s supposed conversion to civilian supremacy, Burggraaff is forced to conclude that the Castro León revolt represented a “refusal to accept the realities of party politics” (p. 180).

It is for these reasons that Burggraaff’s contribution cannot be received as the definitive work on the Venezuelan military, and will be limited to a useful reference work for the uninitiated.

An area which merits the closest possible scrutiny from scholars interested in Venezuela is the performance of the country's democratic regime. In the same manner that the Pérez Jiménez regime could not legitimize its authoritarianism with an extravagant program of public works, Venezuela's democratic regimes must prove that they are not "esoteric." Victor Childers addresses this crucial aspect of Venezuelan democratic reformism in his analysis of the impact of human resources development programs.

He utilizes a solid data base which he manipulates rather well, with no small amount of criticism or qualification when the reliability of the data demands it. The politically neutral tone is obviously intended to make the essay available to the widest possible audience, but scholars will probably utilize this monograph to reach diametrically opposed conclusions. This is inevitable and requires little additional comment except that Childers's own conclusions seem to be positive: Most of what is needed Venezuela can afford, and present shortcomings are not a sign of negligence but a manifestation of the complexity of the problems themselves.

Childers's analysis of the issue of unemployment and underemployment in Venezuela starts with the recognition that human resources continue to be underutilized (p. 11); that employer demands for skilled workers are not being satisfied (p. 17); that this lack of skilled workers has led to the importation of advanced technologies in order to compensate for low labor productivity (p. 27); that as a result of this strategy, capital equipment has been accumulated uneconomically and a tendency to overestimate market possibilities has accompanied this accumulation (p. 29); and that these factors will reduce the employment effects of industrial expansion (pp. 30–31). Impressive as this type of analysis undoubtedly is, there are additional elements at work here: The Venezuelan empresarios' reluctance to produce at full capacity, their continued preference for capital intensive technologies, their unwillingness to deal with the problem of unionization brought about by an increase in the number of employees, and a traditionally cautious approach to expansion—all of which have very little to do with skill levels but may force the government to take corrective action, as the administration of President Carlos Andrés Pérez did recently. The author recognizes some of these factors later in the book, in connection with education policy, but the qualification should have been made much earlier. This suggests that Childers may be assuming that indicative planning is not necessary, something which is being seriously questioned by Venezuelan planners and government officials.

Childers minces no words to describe shortcomings in other areas: School enrollment deficits remain high (p. 60), dropout rates are very high at all levels (pp. 62–63), nearly half of the families are at an income level which subjects them to inadequate nutrition (p. 99), between 40 and 50 percent of the preschool population is estimated vulnerable to malnutrition (p. 133), population growth is compounding every existing problem (p. 144), 30 percent of all births are illegitimate (p. 149), and child abandonment constitutes an alarming problem (p. 151). Childers treats all of these problems as factors contributing to underdevelopment

and economic inefficiency, and not as topics which may lead to social protest. Yet the important point is that he demonstrates the intimate relationships between all of these, which suggests that piecemeal reform simply will not do. There are no denunciations and they are hardly necessary; the data identify problem areas which the Venezuelans themselves are the first to recognize. Moreover, Childers prefaces the presentation of different blocks of data with relevant conclusions drawn from previous research. This is done very effectively in connection with the data on malnutrition: Children who are grossly undernourished as infants become retarded—to a degree dependent on the severity of the malnutrition itself—and they never reach a normal level or physical appearance regardless of improved nutritional conditions at a later stage (p. 104). When such a comment precedes the datum that almost half of the preschool population in Venezuela is vulnerable to malnutrition, very little elaboration is required. Childers merely attests to the reliability of the data and the implications for human growth.

Obviously, the Venezuelan democratic regime is not for malnutrition or for ignorance or for early death. However, even with the fantastic resources at its disposal, the time may come when that regime will have to make some hard choices; choices between the interests of those who have benefited most from the Venezuelan version of “free enterprise” and have very little to gain from human resources development programs, and those who have been neglected up to this point and for whom the democratic experiment is still largely esoteric.

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#### NOTES

1. See Edwin Lieuwen, *Petroleum in Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), and Robert J. Alexander, *The Venezuelan Democratic Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964).
2. From Germán Carrera Damas in his “Estudio Preliminar” to Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico, *Materiales para el estudio de la cuestión agraria en Venezuela (1800–1830), Volumen I* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1964), p. clv.
3. Domingo Alberto Rangel offered the frontier hypothesis in *Los andinos en el poder: Balance de una hegemonía, 1899–1945* (Mérida: Talleres Gráficos Universitarios, 1965). Rangel’s interpretation of the Castro León revolt may be found in his *La revolución de las fantasías* (Caracas: Tipografía Principios, 1966), chap. 12.