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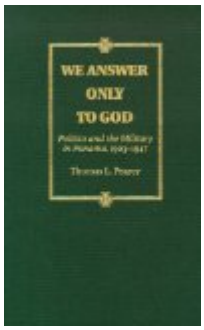
Thomas L. Pearcy. *We Answer Only to God. Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. xvi + 232 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-1841-1.



Reviewed by Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez

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This unspoken question pervades Thomas L. Pearcy's recent contribution to Panama's social and political history. A pathos pervades this work. Witness to attacks upon University students by Panama's National Police, Pearcy brings an enormous amount of heart and soul to Panama's nascent past as he tries to understand the weight of failed democracy and the emergence of the National Police as the interlocutor of Panamanian politics.

Pearcy cornered a dynamic debate in Panamanian history that evoked a powerful sense of nation among the multicultural peoples of the Isthmus. For Pearcy, the post World War II deliberation to authorize the continued U.S. military occupation on bases outside the Canal Zone provoked a passionate anti-American response that transcended class and race. Pearcy sees in the 1947 Filos-Hines treaty debacle firm evidence that Panamanians temporarily broke from an authoritarian past dominated by elite and foreign interests and built a representative coalition that successfully pressured for the rejection of the treaty. Panamanians did not take advantage of this historic breach and soon the multicultural coalition fell apart. The crucial military force of Panama, the National Police, led by the charismatic Jose Remon, seized the historic opportunity and consolidated a Praetorian State that lasted until the U.S. invasion in 1989.

Pearcy joins other scholars in focusing on the lively history of Panama distinguished from the Canal and the preponderant United States. Within this current, Pearcy seeks to combine a social history of Panama with an institutional analysis of the Nationalist Police, curiously called "the social institutionalist approach" (p. xiii). He portrays the creation of a military-style institution to guard a fragile political elite within the changing political economy fueled by the Canal, hampered by the Depression, and leavened by the immigration of diverse peoples.

Pearcy argues that the National Police, an institution created in 1905 after the disbanding of the military in 1904, evolved from a "band of armed partisan supporters" (p. 40) to the moderator of Panamanian politics by 1948. He charts this institutionalization through a chronological ap-

proach to the period. Chapter One captures the dominant and contradictory forces already present in nineteenth-century Panama-to-be from its appendage to Independence from Colombia. The legacy of nineteenth-century records how a weak elite depended upon the intervention of foreign troops to stifle opponents. Chapter Two charts how the new Panamanian elite shifted from its reliance on foreign intervention to the creation of a native police force.

The heart of Pearcy's argument, contained in the last three chapters, rests in his analysis of the 1930s and 1940s. The nation experienced its first armed coup on January 2, 1931, and a moderately nationalist group, the Accion Comunal, assumed power only to fragment in internecine conflict. Splintered and weakened, these insurgent nationalists used "the police to substitute for their own inability to form a united front capable of governing the nation" (p. 58). The National Police, Pearcy asserts, became the crucial force in quelling working-class frustration and in dousing the inflamed middle class. Ricardo Alfaro headed the interim regime (1931-1932) and integrated loyal supporters into the National Police force, a precedent followed by President Harmodio Arias (1932-1936) who incorporated this three-hundred man Guardia Civica into the ranks of the National Police. President Juan Demostenes Arosemena (1936-1939) enhanced the modernization of the police force with weapons and training.

In these two fertile decades, a far-reaching nationalist spirit spread from the city to the countryside, from the University to secondary schools. President Harmodio Arias "who engaged Panama's national psyche," (p. 74) spearheaded this new spirit through education. Professors and students who emerged from the newly organized National University of Panama in 1935 championed this pride for the fatherland and disdain for the ubiquitous Empire. Pearcy credits these students for their ability to organize opposition to the Filos-Hines Treaty in December 1947 (p. 75).

Arnulfo Arias, brother of Harmodio Arias, assumed the Presidency in 1940 after an uncontested election assured by the National Police. Pearcy indicated that Arias' motto, "solo Dios sobre nosotros" (translated as "we answer only to God") reflected his nationalist drive to assure Panama's unquestioned independence and sovereignty. Arias flirted with Italian fascism and developed a severe anti-American rhetoric. Arias attempted to build a loyal sector within the Police by creating the National Secret Police in 1941. Arias worked to disenfranchise politically and economically the immigrant population, especially Caribbean Blacks and Panama's large Jewish Syrian population while solidifying support among Panama's native-born. Such pretensions led to his downfall scarcely after one year in office. Arias' overthrow by the National Police, led by Jose Remon, instituted a decisive change in Panamanian history. Pearcy asserts that "never before had the police acted so publicly as the nation's power broker" (p. 94).

The United States wanted to maintain its expanded military presence outside the Canal Zone after World War II and thus sparked a nationwide protest. The debate over the formal treaty authorizing the U.S. presence on 134 bases exposed some critical tears in the social fabric of Panama. Pearcy asserts that multiple forces converged in 1947: (1) political and economic frustration evidenced by working-class unrest and middle class agitation; (2) growing nationalist sentiment; and (3) an enhanced National Police Force coming of age. When Panama's Foreign Minister Francisco A. Filos and U.S. Ambassador Frank Hines signed the Filos-Hines Treaty on December 10, 1947, they unleashed a chain-reaction of events that would lead to the Treaty's defeat in the National Assembly two weeks later.

The Treaty debate produced the "largest, most diverse, united, and focused political crusade in contemporary Panamanian history" (p. 110). Police intimidation and student protest set the stage

for the "largest, most violent, and most significant political confrontations in Panamanian history" (p. 125). Police Chief Remon justified the brutal dispersion of the protestors on the reports that its leaders "were well-known agitators undoubtedly obeying orders from Moscow" (p. 127). The repression of the students catalyzed a broad-based opposition throughout the land, and forced legislators to block the Treaty. Within one month of the treaty's defeat, the United States evacuated all of its temporary bases outside the Canal Zone (p. 129).

Ironically, Pearcy asserts, the Nationalist Police became the most powerful political actor on the isthmus in the wake of the debate (p. 110). The multiclass and multicultural opposition to the Treaty failed to deepen into a political alternative that would be truly democratic and representative. With the Treaty defeated, the National Police filled the political void created by the confrontation. Within a year, First Commander Jose Remon appointed and removed presidents at will from 1948-1952. Remon became president in 1952 and consolidated the decades' long process: the National Police had become Panama's political overlord.

This book gives its readers suggestive insights into how Panama's police attained such power within a half century. *We Answer Only to God. Politics and the Military in Panama, 1903-1947* analyzes Panama's police, not the military. Though the author accounts for the National Police's rise to power through Remon's leadership, Pearcy cuts his analysis short and does not account for the transition of the police into the National Guard. Jose Remon, in one of his first acts as President of the Republic, approved Law 44 of 1953 and thus converted the 2500 member police force into Panama's National Guard. Looking from this perspective, readers can now understand why Pearcy uses "police" and "military" interchangeably. The title of the book lacks a certain conceptual precision and certainly confuses a reader accustomed to understanding the role of both enforcement institutions in other Central American or Latin American nations. Pearcy only escapes this conflation when he compares Panama's police force with other selected Latin American police forces in 1945. Panama ranked at the top in numbers of police officers per capita (p. 103-104).

When did the National Police become the final arbiter of Panamanian politics? The book offers two answers: at the end of the Generation of '31 when the National Police led by Jose Remon overthrew the Arias government and after the 1947 Filos-Hines Treaty debate. Though Pearcy ultimately opts for the latter, his evidence demonstrates how the Presidents who assumed power in the crucial decade of the1930s transformed the police into an uncontrollable behemoth that took charge by 1941. The author affirmed that a crisis of legitimacy surfaced post treaty debate, yet the author's own evidence suggests that the crucial moment occurred earlier in 1941 with the overthrow of the Arias presidency (p. 94). The1947 Filos-Hines debate and the popular rejection of that treaty provided a momentary breach in the consolidation of that power. At the end of the popular power struggle over the treaty, Remon and his armed constituency overcame the brief challenge and appointed new Presidents until he assumed the office in 1952.

Pearcy's contribution rests in providing readers insight into two extraordinary decades of Panama's social and political transformation. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed decisive moments in Panamanian history when actors and institutions broke with or legitimated political traditions and cultivated a stirring sense of nation. Pearcy correctly asserts that the National Police consolidated its power base in these two decades and took advantage of the incompetence of its political leadership. We do not get a sense, however, of how the charismatic leadership of the National Police played upon this growing nationalist sentiment to

consolidate its hold. Brute force defines the parameters of power of the Police according to the author. Other than an insightful paragraph into the political instincts of Remon to forge a coalition with Panama's urban poor and West Indian populations (p. 95), readers will not capture the nuances and interplay of popular and arbitrary power within this history of the National Police. Rather, the conclusion and epilogue catapult the reader into the dull abyss of elite political machinations.

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