

**CORRUPTION, STATE FORMATION, AND POPULAR RESPONSE
DURING THE REGIME OF JUAN VICENTE GÓMEZ, 1908-1935**

DOUG YARRINGTON, Colorado State University, dyarring@lamar.colostate.edu

Prepared for delivery at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, September 5-8, 2001, Washington, DC (Please do not cite without author's permission)

Class, as British historian E. P. Thompson famously observed, is “something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.”¹ Historians examining state formation in Latin America have adopted similar assumptions, rejecting the reification of the state and insisting that its formation involves the on-going transformation of at least two sets of human relationships, those among political elites and those between the state and society. Within the political elite, those who hold positions of power jockey for advantage among themselves, seeking to consolidate their power through a variety of strategies but perhaps most often by building networks of patronage which over time become increasingly national in reach. Second, rulers and those over whom they seek to exercise authority engage in a (usually lopsided) struggle to define the terms of domination. Each set of relationships, as recent scholarship emphasizes, is subject to constant negotiation as different actors maneuver to protect their economic, cultural, or political interests.² Thus the process of state formation never reaches a point of finality or closure, even though particular states clearly experience

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), p. 9.

² The literature on Mexico and Brazil is especially rich. Examples include, Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, editors, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern*

periods of more intense centralization or fragmentation, greater or lesser ideological hegemony, and so on. Indeed, given scholars' increasingly sophisticated view of all power systems as inherently "decentered" and shifting, it seems that no single narrative could adequately capture a process of state formation in all its multifaceted complexity.³

In Venezuelan history, the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) holds a prominent place in the established narratives of state formation. Before Gómez, the state had remained fragmented as local and regional strongmen controlled politics, monopolized military power, and prevented the emergence of a centralized state.⁴ Gómez, to a greater degree than previous national leaders, imposed his authority over local strongmen, built a more stable system of national finances and administration, professionalized the military, improved the physical infrastructure connecting Venezuela's regions, and thus laid the foundations of Venezuela's modern, centralized state. Although few would argue that his regime gained popular acceptance through its ideology of order and progress, or through its attempt to link Gómez's persona to that of Simón Bolívar, the strongman proved sufficiently adroit at the use of political terror to minimize active domestic opposition.⁵

Mexico (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); and Richard Graham, *Patronage and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

³ Again, the literature is substantial; important examples include Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴ Robert L. Gilmore, *Caudillism and Militarism in Venezuela, 1810-1910* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1964).

⁵ On the ideology of the regime, see Arturo Sosa, *La filosofía política del gomecismo: estudio del pensamiento de Laureano Vallenilla Lanz* (Barquisimeto: Centro Gumilla, 1974), and Ciro Caraballo Perichi, *Obras públicas, fiestas y mensajes (un puntal del régimen gomecista)* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1981). For a representative study of Gómez emphasizing his reliance on political terror, see Thomas Rourke, *Gómez, Tyrant of the Andes* (New York: William Morrow, 1941). For a study of the army with some broader discussion of the regime's repressive apparatus, see Angel Ziemis, *El gomecismo y la formación del ejército nacional* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1979).

Analyses of Gómez's success in realizing his own vision of state building often emphasize the importance of the oil industry and of U. S. and European support for the dictator.⁶ Cipriano Castro, Gómez's predecessor and erstwhile ally, had taken a decidedly nationalist stance against foreign interests, and Gómez's willingness to adopt a more accommodating—some would say subservient—approach to Venezuela's relationships with the great powers played a significant role in allowing him to replace Castro. Similarly, the argument goes, Gómez consolidated international support for his regime by inviting foreign oil companies to operate in Venezuela under generally favorable conditions. Once oil production began in earnest—in the early 1920s—the regime secured sufficient wealth from the industry to continue the state-building projects already underway (modernization of the military, investment in public works, the cooptation of potential opponents, etc.). Indeed, a recent and widely celebrated work on the emergence of the modern state in Venezuela located its origins almost exclusively within the political economy of the oil industry during the Gómez regime.⁷

Despite its dominance in the literature, this interpretation of the process of state formation has its limitations. The United States was unhappy enough with Gómez to consider ousting him in the late 1910s, a sentiment shared in some quarters of the Italian and British governments.⁸ More broadly, any explanation of the regime that argues for

⁶ Examples include Luis Cipriano Rodríguez, *Gómez: Agricultura, petróleo y dependencia* (Caracas: Trópykos, 1983); Tomás Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez, aproximación a una biografía* (Caracas: Grijalbo, 1990); and Yolanda Segnini, *La consolidación del régimen de Juan Vicente Gómez* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1982).

⁷ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 76-84.

⁸ Judith Ewell, *Venezuela and the United States: From Monroe's Hemisphere to Petroleum's Empire* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 120; Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez*, pp. 247-58; and Beaumont to Foreign Office, 31 August 1917, PRO, FO 371 / 3074.

the centrality of the oil industry has to confront a critical problem of timing.⁹ By the time oil wealth began to flow freely in the 1920s, Gómez had already been in power well over a decade, his hold on Venezuela had become virtually unbreakable, and the system that would continue until his death in 1935 was largely in place. Most importantly, interpretations centered on the oil industry and international diplomacy give us little or no sense of the place of the Venezuelan people in the process of state formation, for such histories hardly explore the changing dynamic between the state and society.

One way to advance our understanding of the Gómez regime is to focus on its roots in the agrarian economy. Much of the regime's strength lay in its ability to appropriate—and often to monopolize—the resources of the long-established economy of land, livestock, and agriculture, and to distribute these resources among its members. Gómez orchestrated this process of appropriation by forming business partnerships with many of his state presidents and regional military commanders, the very men whose loyalty provided the foundation for the centralization of political power.¹⁰ These economic ties bound men of influence—including potential adversaries—to Gómez well before the oil boom of the 1920s. Moreover, an analysis of the agrarian aspects of state formation affords greater insight into the dynamics by which the regime and the Venezuelan people (re)negotiated the boundaries of state power and thus affords a greater sense of state formation as “something that happened in human relationships” in Venezuela.

⁹ Emilio Pacheco, *De Castro a López Contreras: Proceso Social de la Venezuela Contemporánea* (Caracas: Editorial Domingo Fuentes, 1984), pp. 41-7. Rejecting petroleum as an explanation for the consolidation of the Gómez regime, Pacheco emphasizes the fiscal reforms of Román Cárdenas and the development of the army.

¹⁰ Elías Pino Iturrieta, “Estudio Preliminar,” in *Los hombres del Benemérito: epistolario inédito* vol. 1 (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1985), pp. 18-25; and Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez*, pp. 435-43.

The Gómez Regime and the Cattle Business

The Gómez regime existed fundamentally as a business enterprise to monopolize wealth generated within the agrarian economy and to distribute it among the men who made up the official faction in power. During its 27 years of existence, the regime came to exercise almost exclusive control over an array of resources such as cattle, beef, milk, heron plumes, salt, liquor, public lands in some regions, and the sale of foodstuffs in major urban markets. For Gómez and his allies, many of whom came from the provincial middle class, political power was never an end in itself, but rather a means of advancing their economic interests. Because these business enterprises relied on political power for their profitability, and because they functioned as partnerships among officials at various levels of the regime's hierarchy, they played a powerful integrative role in consolidating the regime. Meanwhile, many Venezuelans' experience of the Gómez dictatorship occurred through the monopolies, confiscations, and coerced economic transactions which became the hallmarks of Gomecista business networks.

The cattle trade provided the most consistent arena for Gómez's business partnerships with other holders of political power. Indeed, Gómez gave more attention to his cattle business than to any of his other enterprises. He made his living as a small to middling cattle trader and rancher for many years before entering politics. Later, during the administration of his *compadre* Cipriano Castro (1899-1908), Gómez served as a state president, vice-president, and military commander, but devoted considerable time and attention to expanding his cattle business. He formed partnerships with Castro and other government officials, and by 1903 he had become the largest supplier of beef to

Caracas.¹¹ This marriage between political power and the cattle business proved to be a double-edged sword, however, when Castro abruptly ended the partnership and imposed a lopsided settling of accounts which almost bankrupted Gómez. The lesson for Gómez was that only the business interests of the president were secure.¹²

Upon seizing power in 1908, Gómez had a free hand to expand his cattle enterprises across the country. Indeed, the logic of the industry dictated that any ambitious cattleman think in national terms.¹³ The llanos, stretching across the central and southern portions of Venezuela, had long constituted the primary region for the production of Venezuelan cattle herds. The major urban centers, providing the most lucrative domestic markets, all lay well to the north; most were either on the Caribbean coast or within 40 miles of it. (These northern cities included Venezuela's principal export centers, but Gómez's chief concern was always the domestic market for cattle and beef, presumably because he could control marketing, prices, and competitors.¹⁴) Cattle raised in the llanos faced an arduous trek overland to market, which inevitably left them thin, worn, and in need of roughly two months' grazing before they could be profitably slaughtered in Caracas, Valencia, or other northern cities. Good pastureland near the major markets was at a premium and could prove as critical to a cattle enterprise as extensive landholdings in the llanos. In sum, the large-scale production, movement, and

¹¹ Mariano Picón-Salas, *Los días de Cipriano Castro* (Caracas: Ediciones Garrido, 1953), p. 205.

¹² Documents relating to these partnerships are collected in *Boletín del Archivo Histórico de Miraflores* (hereafter, *BAHM*) no. 89 (Jan.-Feb. 1976), pp. 121-133; see also the findings in Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicent Gómez*, pp. 79-80, 84-87.

¹³ For background on the Venezuelan cattle industry, see Gaston Carvallo, *El hato venezolano, 1900-1980* (Caracas: Tropykos, 1985), and Tarcila Briceño, *La ganadería en los llanos centro-occidentales venezolanos, 1910-1935* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1985).

¹⁴ Gómez exported some cattle to the island of Trinidad, but the major initiative in beef exports from Venezuela during this period was a frozen meat enterprise owned by British investors, which forms the subject of my manuscript, "The Venezuelan General and the British Lord: The Gómez Regime and the Vestey Cattle Enterprise, 1908-1935," unpublished manuscript.

marketing of cattle demanded a national strategy and could best be protected and advanced through a nation-wide system of political power.

During his years as president, Gómez became the largest landowner in Venezuela, at times creating the impression that he had an irrational obsession with the acquisition of territory. But many of his acquisitions followed the logic of the cattle industry (his major investments in the production of coffee, Venezuela's leading export until 1925, generally came after that date). He owned more ranch land and cattle in the llanos than any other individual.¹⁵ But unlike most ranchers he gave equal or greater attention to the acquisition of pastureland in the vicinity of the major northern markets.¹⁶ Maracay, the city 100 kilometers west of Caracas where Gómez had his primary residence from 1911 onward and which became the center of his cattle empire, was located at the natural entryway for cattle herds driven from the llanos to the coastal region. Aside from acquiring existing pastureland in the north, Gomez (like his political allies and frequent business partners, Antonio Pimentel and Félix Galavís¹⁷) frequently acquired agricultural land and converted it to pasture. One especially dramatic ecological transformation involved conversion of extensive sugar fields around Lake Valencia into grazing land for the General's cattle during the early years of the regime. "[I]t is," wrote the British minister in 1912, searching for a comparison that readers at the Foreign Office would understand, "as if the most agricultural districts of Lincolnshire were turned into a deer

¹⁵ Briceño, *La ganadería*, pp. 95-99. Briceño argues that a British company, the Lancashire General Investment Trust Limited, owned more land and cattle than Gómez.

¹⁶ Gómez's known property acquisitions are listed individually, year by year and state by state, in Crisalida Dupuy, *Propiedades del General Juan Vicente Gómez, 1901-1935* (Caracas: Contraloría General de la República, 1983).

¹⁷ Luis Cirpiano Rodríguez, "Gomez y el agro," in Elías Pino Iturrieta, editor, *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1988), p. 104.

park.”¹⁸ This land surrounding Lake Valencia became part of Gómez’s enormous holdings near Maracay, around which much of his daily routine revolved. Rising at five o’clock each morning, Gómez customarily spent several hours transacting official business before spending most of the day at his nearby estates, inspecting his herds.

Gómez achieved the rapid expansion of his cattle interests largely by establishing business partnerships with regional military commanders and state presidents. These officials often joined their capital (and their influence) with that of Gómez to buy land and livestock and then assumed responsibility for the management of the enterprise.¹⁹ After receiving one such proposal from General Pedro Murillo, an appointee in western Venezuela (Táchira), Gómez sent a typical response:

I received your letter of the 7th of last month. You’re always thinking about cattle deals. I’m the same way, and I’m glad the opportunity presents itself for us to join our fortunes together. I wish for you to make this investment with money from each of us, and for this purpose you can count on the sum Antonio mentioned to me.²⁰

¹⁸ "Venezuela Annual Report, 1912," p. 12, PRO, FO 371/1861. Having recently visited the region, the minister was struck by the social as well as the ecological consequences of Gómez’s action, since sugar production on the land in question had supported far more families than the new cattle enterprise would ever employ.

¹⁹ For typical examples, see Baldó to Gómez, 25 March 1915, in *BAHM* nos. 61-63 (1969), pp. 72-73; and Galavís to Gómez, 2 October 1910, *Los hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp.327-8. Baldó was president of the state of Portuguesa and Galavís was Inspector General of the Army when they wrote the cited letters. See also Peter S. Linder, "Agriculture and Rural Society in Pre-Petroleum Venezuela: The Sur del Lago Zuliano, 1880-1920," Ph.D dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1992, pp. 230-232.

²⁰ Gómez to Murillo, 5 December 1908, *BAHM* nos. 114-115 (1981-82), p. 9. See also JVG to Gral. Pedro Murillo (San Cristobal), January 16, 1909, *BAHM* nos. 114-115 (July 1981--Dec. 1982), p. 20.

Beginning in the mid-1910s, British and American diplomats reported that Gómez and his allies—especially military men and state presidents—had established a “monopoly” over the domestic market for cattle and beef in large areas of the republic.²¹

Political power came to shape every facet of the cattle business. Ranchers offering property or livestock for sale were required to give Gómez or his local representative first option to buy.²² Owners who, when asked, refused to part with their properties were vulnerable to various forms of persuasion; one recalcitrant woman agreed to sell her land only after officials rounded up all her laborers, ostensibly for military service, leaving her with no labor to work the estate.²³ Other property owners who declined to sell to Gómez at the prices he set were threatened with imprisonment in one of the regime’s infamous prisons.²⁴ With such means at his disposal, Gómez rarely paid the market value when purchasing land and cattle.

In truth, much of the money for Gómez’s acquisitions came from the public treasury rather than from his own private income (with the distinction between the two becoming increasingly blurred over time). In some cases, Gómez simply took large sums of money from public revenues. By 1917, such appropriations occurred so regularly in

²¹Harford to Grey, 12 February 1914, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 420/258; McGoodwin to Department of State, 10 February 1914, 831.00/630, National Archive and Records Administration (hereafter, NARA), Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Venezuela, 1910-1929, microcopy no. 366; and Freeman to McGoodwin, enclosed in McGoodwin to Department of State, 8 October 1917, 831.00/807, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

²²“Venezuela. Annual Report, 1914,” in PRO, FO 371/ 2501; and Emilio Arévalo Cedeño, *Viva Arévalo Cedeño (el libro de mis luchas)* (Caracas: Publicaciones Seleven, 1979 [orig., 1936]), pp. 9-11.

²³Harford to Grey, 6 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502. The woman sold her estate, near Maracay, “to the Nation,” but it was assumed to be for Gómez’s use.

²⁴Harford to Grey, 29 January 1916, PRO, FO 371/2801. Following a visit to eastern Venezuela, a U.S. consul wrote of conditions in that region, “Men who have refused to sell their farms to the President elect [Gómez] or his friends at prices offered by them have been sent to prison as political offenders, have had troops camped upon their places and have had young goats by the thousands turned into their plantations of cocoa. According to all accounts, the story of Naboth's vineyard is one of the commonplaces of Venezuelan life.” Brett to Department of State, 23 September 1915, 831.00/753, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

the summer of each year that *Caraqueños* (residents of Caracas) had dubbed them “the annual fund drive upon the National Treasury.”²⁵ Gómez reportedly distributed some of the funds to various high-ranking officials but kept roughly 90 percent (2.7 million bolívares) for himself, presumably using the money to invest in his business ventures. Public revenues underwrote Gómez’s investments in other ways as well. The dictator engaged in a number of highly favorable property transactions with the national government, always buying property from the state at a price well below its true value and selling property to the state at inflated prices. Gómez acquired several large properties in the llanos through an advantageous exchange with the national government in 1915, trading an assortment of modest urban properties for valuable ranches that the national government had seized from the exiled Cipriano Castro and his relatives.²⁶ In 1926 Gómez sold to the nation a rural estate (El Caura, in Bolívar state) for 17 million bolívares, though he had paid only a quarter of a million for the property, and apparently used the profits to buy other rural properties.²⁷ Gómez continued to engage in similar transactions—all approved by the national congress and technically legal—into the early 1930s.²⁸ The most valuable properties Gómez acquired in this fashion were connected to the cattle empire he built with his collaborators.

To ensure markets for their ever-expanding herds, Gómez and his allies used various tactics to ensure that their competitors captured only a small share of Venezuela’s limited market for beef. They accomplished this largely by establishing tight control over

²⁵ McGoodwin to Department of State, 3 August 1917, 831.52/49, NARA, microcopy 366. The American legation believed that Gómez also skimmed 4% of all Venezuelan government payments to British creditors. McGoodwin to Department of State, 21 September 1917, 831.51/52, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

²⁶ Dupuy, *Propiedades del General*, p. 46; and Harford to Grey, 6 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502.

²⁷ Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez*, p. 476; and Cook to Department of State, 26 June 1926, 831.00/1302, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

the movement and slaughter of cattle. State governments imposed hefty taxes on the movement of livestock across state boundaries, imposing prohibitive costs on cattlemen taking livestock north to market, but officials did not collect the levies on herds belonging to Gómez and his allies.²⁹ Thus Vincencio Pérez Soto, the president of the state of Apure, wrote to Gómez in 1915 to assure him that “here nothing is being charged on your cattle for the State or Municipal dues, nor are the Municipal dues being charged on your horses that enter [San Fernando de Apure], because this is what is just with me being in this office [puesto].”³⁰ Similarly, León Jurado, as president of Guárico (like Apure, a ranching state in the llanos), proposed a new cattle tax in 1924, but made it clear that he would selectively enforce the new levy. As Jurado explained to Enrique Urdaneta Maya, Gómez’s secretary, “we have understood that those [cattle] of our Chief and of some friends will remain exempt from this tax, but not those who speculate in this sector and take out large lots; it is just that they should pay a tax[.]”³¹ Jurado and Pérez Soto, both long-time allies and business partners of Gómez, presumably exempted their own considerable herds from state and local taxes as well.

To guarantee the official faction a final advantage over the competitors who remained in the cattle business, Gómez established his control over the butchering of cattle in the municipal slaughterhouses of the major urban markets. He appointed inspectors to the public slaughterhouses in the principal cities and instructed them to reject any cattle of “doubtful origin” and to accept only cattle that had been properly

²⁸ Summerlin to Secretary of State, 15 July 1931, 831.00/1487, Box 5785, Record Group 59, National Archives (College Park, MD).

²⁹ Beaumont to Curzon, 26 May 1923, PRO, FO 371/8530.

³⁰ Pérez Soto to Gómez, 26 June 1915, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, p. 276.

³¹ Jurado to Urdaneta Maya, 23 June 1924, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, pp. 84-85.

fattened.³² Such admonitions were understood to mean that only cattle coming from ranches or pasturelands belonging to Gómez and his allies should be accepted for butchering. Indeed, some diplomatic personnel believed that government-appointed inspectors, for fear of losing their jobs, even permitted the slaughter and sale of *diseased* cattle belonging to government officials.³³

This monopoly of the cattle trade and the marketing of beef made the power of the state a reality in the lives of many Venezuelans who had previously remained indifferent to politics. Ranchers and cattle traders who fell afoul of the official cartel found their livelihoods eroded or destroyed. Reporting on the growing number of Venezuelans leaving the western state of Táchira for refuge in Colombia, the U. S. ambassador in Caracas asserted that many were “cattle raisers, large and small, who claim to have been driven out of that industry by Generals Gómez and [Félix] Galavís, who have an absolute monopoly on cattle raising and the sale of beef and all by products.”³⁴ In the *llanos* (plains), where cattle raising constituted the principal industry, the Gomecista monopoly had similar effects. Emilio Arévalo Cedeño, one of the most persistent anti-Gómez rebels, wrote in his memoirs of the anger and humiliation he experienced when, in 1913, he was forced to trade horses and cattle with Gómez’s representative in San Fernando de Apure, General Eulogio Moros. The prices imposed by Moros, allegedly after consultation with Gómez, left Arévalo ruined. He claimed that he

³² Gómez to Martínez Méndez, 4 December 1913, *BAHM* nos. 64-66 (January-June 1970), p. 299; and Hidalgo to Gómez, 2 September 1915, *BAHM* nos. 61-63 (July-Dec. 1969), pp. 359-360.

³³ Work to Harford, 14 May 1915, PRO, FO 199/224.

³⁴ McGoodwin to Secretary of State, 10 February 1914, 831.00/630, NARA, microcopy no. 366. McGoodwin reported that the military draft also produced refugees. In later years, Venezuelans fled across the border to escape the repression orchestrated by Eustoquio Gómez who served as President of the state of Táchira, 1914-1925; he had just been named to the post when McGoodwin wrote his despatch.

and other cattlemen had little choice but to rebel in order to save their honor and "what little remained of our interests."³⁵

Consumers of beef suffered from the official monopoly less than did ranchers and cattle traders, but for them as well formerly mundane transactions became concrete reminders of the state's power. Gómez's beef monopoly in major cities kept prices high; his representatives and inspectors controlled the weighing of meat as well as its supply, and were said to give consumers only 12 ounces of beef while charging for a pound.³⁶ In Gómez's home state of Táchira, on Venezuela's western border, the monopoly exercised by the dictator and his relatives meant that consumers paid twice as much for beef as consumers just across the border in Colombia.³⁷ The British ambassador reported on a new affront to consumers in the early 1930s:

A few years ago [Gómez] erected model dairies and a slaughter-house at Maracay to supply the neighbouring country as far as Caracas with dairy products and meat. The meat is killed at Maracay and chilled and then shipped to Caracas in refrigerating vans. This chilling has the effect of improving the meat, making it more tender. This has been the cause of much dissatisfaction in the capital, where the taste is decidedly in favour of tough, freshly killed meat, and in the family circle the other variety is referred to as 'carne podrida' ('rotten meat'). The residents, however, have no choice in the matter, and must either buy the meat supplied by the President or go without. In certain of the suburbs which lie

³⁵ E. Arévalo Cedeño, *Viva Arévalo Cedeño (el libro de mis luchas)* (Caracas: Publicaciones Seleven, 1979 [orig., 1936], p. 8 (see also pp. 9-11).

³⁶ "The Situation in Venezuela," enclosed in McGoodwin to Secretary of State, 16 March 1914, 831.00/640, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

outside the Caracas jurisdiction this freshly-killed variety is obtainable, but the road is well watched to prevent any smuggling, and cars, both commercial and private, are frequently stopped and searched.³⁸

Thus the simple act of buying and eating meat became an act of submission to the Gómez regime—no less so than the forced sales of land and cattle to the dictator and his allies. State power transformed these commonplace transactions into vibrant reminders of the regime's increasing control over everyday life.

In the last years of the regime, Gómez undertook an extensive restructuring of the industry, seeking to defuse widespread resentment and to provide the beleaguered cattle industry a ray of hope. In 1934, the government announced the formation of the *Compañía Ganadera Industrial Venezolana* for the sale of chilled and preserved meats, presenting it as the salvation of the cattle industry. As the British legation reported, the initiative came “at an opportune moment, since it must be admitted that many were beginning to lose their patience with the policy of the President and his friends, who have systematically smothered all enterprise in which they were not personally interested, and a certain murmuring had begun against them which had even become more or less public.”³⁹ The reorganization of the industry promised stock raisers the free movement of herds, as well as opportunities to buy shares in the Company and to sell cattle to the Company's slaughterhouse at Maracay. But it was also apparent from the beginning that the company would be built around Gómez, the principal shareholder, and the state

³⁷ Sauer to Secretary of State, 31 March 1919, 831.00/898, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

³⁸ "Venezuela Annual Report, 1932," p. 17, PRO, FO 371/16622.

³⁹ "Memorandum on the present conditions, economic and commercial, in Venezuela," enclosed in Keeling to Simon, 2 March 1934, PRO, FO 371/17618. See also, Rodríguez, "Gómez y el agro," p. 104.

presidents, who would be invited to buy shares and thus would have a stake in the unhindered passage of cattle belonging to the Company. As the British report explained,

The company is to guarantee the President an income of 11,000 bolívares per day, that is taking forty to forty-five beasts per diem at the rate of 7 bolívares per arroba, with which must be included certain minor additional fees. The remaining breeders may sell their stock, which is now to be granted free movement, to the company at 4 bolívares per arroba, the difference in price being partly accounted for by the fact that these cattle will not be classified as 'fattened stock' as are the general's, and partly, it may be said, to keep the general good. The company is to consist of various shareholders, including the President, the Governors of States (who thus will have a stake in the industry and will not wish to follow their previous policy of obstruction), and certain capitalists in the country who have interests in cattle. This scheme may, perhaps, be the saving of the cattle breeders, who, with the present policy of monopoly and suppression, are almost starving.⁴⁰

That the company could be organized so clearly for Gómez's personal benefit and still be viewed as a concession to those who had suffered under the previous system of monopoly, provides a dramatic testimony (if any more were needed) to the General's control of the cattle industry at the time of the Company's founding. At best, it offered ranchers a secure outlet for some of their cattle and a more predictable, less arbitrary working environment. In granting Gómez and some of the state presidents control of the

company, the arrangement merely affirmed the common knowledge that the Gomecista state existed largely as a business enterprise.

The reduction in cattle taxes that occurred with the organization of the Company may have reinvigorated the livestock industry in the short term, at least in some regions. In San Fernando, the capital of Apure and a center of the cattle trade, the retail price of meat fell from 1.5 or 2.0 bolívares per kilo to as low as 0.5 bolívares within months of the Company's creation. Meanwhile, the number of steers processed at the municipal slaughterhouse rose from two per day to six or seven.⁴¹

Within a year, however, it became clear that the Company operated more or less exclusively for the benefit of Gómez and his closest allies. Half the cattle slaughtered by the Company at Maracay came from the General's herds, presumably sold by him at the inflated prices mentioned above. Other ranchers selling to the Company at its slaughterhouse found themselves obliged to graze their livestock on the General's lands—"at exorbitant charges"—before the Company would buy.⁴² Gómez also owned the land on which the Company's facilities had been constructed, and charged a hefty rent each month. Much of the money paid by the Company to Gómez for cattle and rent came from the national government, which granted the Company an annual subsidy ranging from 5 to 7.5 million bolívares.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid. Using the average 1934 exchange rate of 3.54 bolívares to one U. S. dollar (Miguel Izard, *Series estadísticas para la historia de Venezuela* [Mérida, Venezuela: Universidad de Los Andes, 1970], p. 217), Gómez's projected daily income from cattle sales to the company equalled approximately 3,107.30 dollars.

⁴¹ Ramírez to Gómez, 24 May 1934, in *Los hombres del Benemérito* vol. 2, pp. 331-2. Some of the improvement in the local cattle business may have been due to the administration of Juan Alberto Ramírez, who had recently been appointed president of Apure and was long considered one of least corrupt of Gómez's state presidents. For a favorable view of Ramírez, see Nemecio Parada, *De Ocumare a Miraflores* (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, Biblioteca de Autores y Temas Tachirenses, 1975), pp. 73-8.

⁴² "Venezuela, Annual Report, 1935," PRO, FO 371/19847.

⁴³ Ibid., and Keeling to Simon, 20 May 1935, PRO, FO 371/18782

In short, whatever hopes the Company may have raised soon came crashing down as the true nature of the enterprise came to light, angering ranchers, consumers, and taxpayers at a single stroke. Gómez's death in December 1935, less than two years after the Company's founding, caught public outrage at its peak. In the upheaval that followed the dictator's demise, rioters sacked the Caracas retail shops of the Company.⁴⁴

State Presidents, the Military, and the Etiquette of Profiteering

If the cattle cartel provided the most fully developed model of the Gomecista state as a business enterprise, other ventures designed for profiteering from the agrarian economy emerged as recognizable variations on the model. To be sure, the cattle monopoly constructed by Gómez and his allies proved unique in that it was national in scope, was based largely on formal partnerships and joint investments of capital by Gómez and his top allies, and was active from the early years of the regime to the very end. Other enterprises designed to appropriate resources and distribute them among the regime's officials usually did not take on this full ensemble of characteristics. Most were confined to a particular region or locality, and some were short-term enterprises. And, while any enterprise of significance needed Gómez's approval, he did not invest his capital in every one. Nevertheless, the cattle cartel did share vital characteristics with the other business enterprises of Gomecista officials. All such ventures depended on political power to function while simultaneously reproducing power through the distribution of profits up and down the political hierarchy, binding men to each other and to Gómez for their mutual benefit and thus strengthening the state.

⁴⁴ Nicholson to Department of State, 30 December 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, National Archives (College Park, MD).

The role of these enterprises in integrating and maintaining the network of state presidents who comprised the core of the Gomecista system deserves special emphasis. Gómez's preference for state presidents as business partners became clear in the development of his cattle business. In part this reflected the presidents' ability to supervise ranches and the movement of herds in the provinces; state presidents proved more useful to Gómez than, for example, cabinet ministers because of their location. But the loyalty of state presidents was also crucial to the security of the regime. Whereas cabinet ministers came overwhelmingly from the ranks of urban bureaucrats, businessmen, and lawyers, state presidents almost invariably held the title of "general." Like Gómez himself, they claimed the title based on experience rather than formal training or advancement through the ranks of the increasingly professional national army. Many had fought alongside Gómez when he and Castro seized power in 1899 and when Gómez led the suppression of the anti-Castro revolt of 1901-3. Despite his growing reliance on the professionalized units of the army, which were almost invariably stationed at Maracay or Caracas, Gómez valued the military experience of the state presidents and usually relied on them to suppress revolts in the outlying provinces.⁴⁵ The state presidents commanded ragged armies made up of forced recruits with little training, but in combination with one another they could threaten the regime.

Speculation about the loyalty of various state presidents became a staple of the Caracas rumor mill,⁴⁶ but their business partnerships with Gómez aided in preserving their fealty. Investment in land or other fixed assets gave the state presidents a clear

⁴⁵ For examples, see Cipriano Heredia A., *El año 29: recuento de la lucha armada* (Caracas: Avilarte, 1974); and the documents collected in "La campaña de Apure," *BAHM* nos. 130-132 (July 1989-June 1990), pp. 163-208.

stake in the preservation of the regime because such assets would surely be seized in the event that the regime was overthrown. Vincencio Pérez Soto, who served Gómez as the president of several states, assumed that the dictator noticed which of his allies invested their money in Venezuela and which ones sent their money out of the country, hedging their bets, as it were. Thus, while serving as president of the western state of Zulia, he took special care to inform Gómez that he recently had sunk his money into an hacienda near Puerto Cabello, calling the estate “a kind of money-box [alcancía] for my savings.” He continued:

By investing all my cash reserves in this estate, I hope that you will see my sure faith in the future of our Cause at this time, and my decided will to accompany and serve you until the end; for those friends who hoard resources and do not buy real estate [bienes raíces] give the impression that they are thinking of a possible retreat, while those of us who follow your example, invest what we have because we harbor much faith, and in the last instance our retreat is to the only point that honor accepts: six feet [dos varas] under ground. And for that journey one needs no resources.⁴⁷

Despite the obsequious tone of the letter, Gómez probably valued the expression of loyalty, coming as it did just after the student protests of February 1928, one of the most serious political challenges faced by the regime. Moreover, Gómez could take comfort that Pérez Soto—occasionally rumored to be planning a U. S. backed succession of the

⁴⁶ McGoodwin to Secretary of State, 13 April 1914, 831.00/651, NARA, microcopy no. 366; and McGoodwin to Secretary of State, 27 January 1919, 831.00/887, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

western oil region (with echoes of Panama's separation from Colombia)—was investing at least some of his petroleum skimmings in the central region of the country.

There developed, in short, an etiquette of profiteering. Officials' devotion to the regime could be judged by the enterprises in which they invested. But Gómez—who kept virtually his entire fortune in Venezuela⁴⁸—was also bound by certain expectations. The state presidents expected Gómez to allow them access to the financial spoils of office, either through partnerships with the General or through their own local enterprises which could be guaranteed profits through the application of political muscle. Successive presidents of the state of Apure, for example, joined with Gómez in controlling much of the lucrative trade in *garza* (heron) plumes by rigidly enforcing the law against shooting herons, and then sending their agents to shoot the birds with impunity.⁴⁹ So numerous were the state presidents who controlled a share of the liquor trade in their regions that Gómez would have offended any president to whom he denied a cut without good cause.⁵⁰ In turn, of course, state presidents needed to share the spoils of their enterprises with their own subordinates—for example, the *jefes civiles* (district governors)—in order to keep local administration running smoothly. Quite naturally, the fundamental rule in the etiquette of profiteering was that all officials who played a part in operating or protecting a particular enterprise needed to share in its profits.

⁴⁷ Pérez Soto to Gómez, 3 March 1928, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, pp. 301-2.

⁴⁸ Polanco Alcantara, *Juan Vicente Gómez*, p. 456.

⁴⁹ Williams to Department of State, 30 November 1922, 831.6232/3, NARA, microcopy no. 366; Dormer to Curzon, 1 March 1920, PRO, FO 371/4622; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 3 January 1919, *BAHM* no. 74 (Sept.-Dec., 1972), pp. 195-6; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 1 September 1919, in *ibid.*, pp. 206-8; and Pérez Soto to Gómez, 4 July 1920, in *ibid.*, pp. 228-30.

⁵⁰ García to Gómez, 21 May 1913, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp. 357-8; Pérez Soto to Gómez, 29 November 1924, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, pp. 285-6; Jurado to Gómez, 16 December 1931, in *ibid.*, pp. 91-2; Rivas to Gómez, 14 February 1931, in *ibid.*, pp. 379-80.

This ethos clearly governed the appropriation of coffee lands in Crespo, the mountainous district north of Barquisimeto in the state of Lara. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, peasant migrants established coffee farms on the vast, unclaimed national lands (*terrenos baldíos*) that stretched north of the town of Duaca, the district capital. An alliance of Gomecista officials oversaw the privatization and distribution of these lands, amounting to over 25,000 hectares, in the late 1910s and early 1920s. The national government had to approve the granting of private title to national lands, but state and local officials planned and carried out the process of privatization. The lion's share of the land transferred to private ownership became the property of these very officials—two presidents of Lara, the *jefes civiles* (district governors) of Crespo and Barquisimeto, and Crespo's district judge, as well as various local entrepreneurs with ties to prominent Gomecistas. Very few of the peasant cultivators living on the former public domain received title to the land they occupied, even though the public land laws stipulated that occupants should receive first option to obtain title. The vast majority became tenants on the newly formed estates owned by the politically powerful and found themselves subjected to an increasingly onerous system of rents.⁵¹ The spoils of this enterprise—ownership of land already planted with food crops and productive coffee groves, and control over the local labor force—were distributed conscientiously to members of the Gomecista network. Meanwhile, peasant discontent in the district—usually expressed through resistance to the collection of rent—dramatized the new

⁵¹ Doug Yarrington, *A Coffee Frontier: Land, Society, and Politics in Duaca, Venezuela, 1830-1936* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), especially pp. 138-148.

landlords' heightened dependence on one another for mutual protection. The strength and unity of the Gomecista state was now their best bulwark against popular retribution.⁵²

This etiquette governing the distribution of spoils extended to operations involving the army. Periodic revolts against the regime provided the army with ample opportunities for profiteering. Most commonly, cattle and horses were commandeered from private ranches as supplies for the troops in the field. Or, troops appropriated livestock from ranchers as a "fine" for allegedly sympathizing with rebels, in one case taking 300 steers from a single estate.⁵³ Some of the livestock taken in this fashion "found its way to the potreros [pasture lands] belonging to Gómez," according to an English businessman whose travels landed him in the middle of at least two revolts in 1914-1915.⁵⁴ But military forces in the field also sold much of the livestock they appropriated, keeping a share of the profits for themselves, as was their right within the regime's ethic of profiteering.⁵⁵

One of the best documented cases of the military appropriating resources for distribution among its own officers and other Gomecista officials occurred in the cacao-growing region of Los Caños, in the eastern state of Sucre. At the end of 1914, rebels in Los Caños sacked a valuable cacao plantation jointly owned by Juan Vicente Gómez and his former mistress, Dionisia Bello. In retaliation, Gómez ordered Generals Paulino Torres and Clemente González to occupy other estates in the region and recoup the losses by harvesting and selling the cacao crop. Troops dispatched from Caracas and Maracay

⁵² Ibid., pp. 148-155.

⁵³ "Venezuela Annual Report, 1914," p. 4, PRO, FO 371/2501.

⁵⁴ Cecil Meyerheim, "Memorandum on Revolutionary Efforts in the Eastern Areas of Venezuela," 27 April 1915, enclosed with Harford to Grey, 28 April 1915, PRO, FO 371/2502.

⁵⁵ Ibid.; and Elliott to Dormer, 30 December 1920, PRO, FO 199/ 219.

stayed on the estates for six months, despite vigorous protests from French, Italian, and British diplomats on behalf of the foreigners who owned and worked on several of the estates and who suffered arrest, confinement, and interrogation by the government forces.⁵⁶ Dr. Ezequiel Vivas, Gómez's secretary and liaison with field commanders in Los Caños, attempted to justify the troops' actions by coercing captured workers to declare that the estate owners had aided the rebels, but the workers refused, even after suffering confinement in the regime's notorious prison at Puerto Cabello.⁵⁷ In the course of pressing claims for damages, the British legation assembled evidence that proceeds from the sale of seized cacao were distributed widely among the commanders and junior officers who carried out the operation, with additional shares going to Gómez, Bello, and Vivas.⁵⁸ The attack on foreign nationals and their property made the incident unusual and produced especially extensive documentation, but the distribution of spoils among officers, officials, and Gómez's clan followed the unwritten code governing all such enterprises.⁵⁹

When an official disregarded this etiquette and claimed a disproportionate share of the spoils for himself, the resulting rift in the regime was occasionally serious enough that it became public knowledge. Such a conflict erupted in the western state of Zulia between President Isilio Febres Cordero and the jefe civil of Maracaibo, General Juan

⁵⁶ Harford to Grey, 15 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2051.

⁵⁷ McGoodwin to Department of State, 1 March 1915, 831.00/722, NARA, microcopy 366.

⁵⁸ Much of the documentation regarding the events in Los Caños is collected in two files: "Caños, Government Raid On," PRO, FO 199/185; and "Caños, Government Raid On and Claims," PRO, FO 199/186. See also Harford to Grey, 16 July 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501; Harford to Grey, 13 August 1915, PRO, FO 371/2051; and Beaumont to Balfour, 15 October 1917, PRO, FO 371/3074. For compelling testimony from two British subjects in Los Caños, see Thomas to British Minister, 12 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501; and Rochemont to British Minister, 29 March 1915, PRO, FO 371/2501. See also "Memorandum de los hechos realizados en el Municipio Mariño, Distrito Rivero, Estado Sucre," *BAHM* nos. 61-63 (July-December 1969), pp. 183-5.

⁵⁹ The Venezuelan government settled the British claims in 1921, following six years of negotiations. "Venezuela Annual Report, 1921," pp. 13-15, PRO, FO 371/7325.

Fernández. Customarily, the jefes civiles shared with their state presidents the money they collected through a variety of extralegal practices.⁶⁰ In 1926, however, Fernández and Febres Cordero quarreled over the “fines” collected from vendors in Maracaibo’s public market, as well as the bribes Fernández demanded for the release of men forcibly recruited for military service.⁶¹ The U. S. consul in Maracaibo reported that the breach between the two officials had become so bitter and so public that one of them would have to be removed from office, and soon thereafter Febres Cordero was transferred.⁶²

Gómez’s success in controlling and centralizing state power for twenty-seven years resulted, in large part, from his ability to allocate spoils among his allies in accordance with the political needs of the moment. His surviving correspondence leaves no doubt that Gomez personally regulated the distribution of spoils. He personally decided which of his allies and business partners could sell cattle, and in what quantities, to the public slaughterhouses in the major urban centers.⁶³ He distributed the local liquor concessions, one of the most sought after perquisites of office.⁶⁴ Even when Gómez turned certain enterprises over to relatives or close associates, he maintained ultimate control. Thus José Vicente Gómez, one of the dictator’s sons and for a time his heir apparent, oversaw the control of gambling houses, but when he disagreed with the

⁶⁰ "Venezuela Annual Report, 1932," p. 12, PRO, FO 371/16622; and Parada, *De Ocumare a Miraflores*, pp. 74-5.

⁶¹ Sloan [U. S. consul, Maracaibo] to Department of State, 8 April 1926, 831.00/1293.

⁶² Ibid. In early June, Gómez transferred Febres Cordero to the presidency of Trujillo. The U.S. minister believed that Gómez had removed Febres Cordero because he had proved too weak in his management of Zulia (the center of Venezuela’s oil industry), and that the new appointee, Vincencio Pérez Soto, would provide stronger leadership; see “General Conditions Prevailing in Venezuela,” p. 5, enclosed with Cook to Secretary of State, 7 June 1926, 831.00/1298, NARA, microcopy 366. Fernández’s open challenge to Febres Cordero’s authority presumably contributed to the perception of the latter’s weakness.

⁶³ Galavís to Gómez, 24 September 1925, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp. 333-334; and Galavís to Gómez, 23 Sept. 1926, *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp. 335-6.

⁶⁴ González to Gómez, 4 September 1911, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp. 493-4; García to Gómez, 21 May 1913, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, p. 357; and Pérez Soto to Gómez, 14 November 1913, in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, pp. 271-2.

president of Sucre over the appointment of an official to manage such businesses in the state, Juan Vicente settled the dispute.⁶⁵

Gómez's success in building a national state cannot be separated from his success in regulating the etiquette of spoils across the vast expanses of Venezuelan territory. The dictator's ability to enforce his will in such matters rested on a number of factors—his control of the best equipped and trained units of the military (always stationed in Maracay or Caracas), his international support, and the increasingly robust condition of the national treasury. But surely one of the most powerful motivations for state presidents and regional military commanders to remain loyal to Gómez was the certainty of sharing in the spoils (including, eventually, the lucrative oil concessions) even if, on occasion, Gómez made a decision that disadvantaged them in a particular enterprise.

Rituals of Submission, Popular Resistance, and The Negotiation of Rule

The argument thus far has focussed on the integrative role of profiteering in consolidating relationships among the politically powerful, but profiteering's contribution to state formation went much further. Profiteering also played a role in extending and tightening the regime's hold on Venezuelan society. The economic enterprises of the regime's officials infused daily life with reminders of the regime's power. As coerced economic transactions multiplied with the spread of profiteering, they injected political symbolism into everyday routines, ritualizing submission to the regime. Whenever consumers bought meat, whenever a cattle breeder sold his stock to one of Gómez's representatives in a bad bargain, whenever a tenant on one of Crespo's new estates paid

⁶⁵ Parada, *De Ocumare*, pp. 75-6. The dictator supported the state president, Juan Alberto Ramírez, in excluding gambling from the

rent, whenever a llanero refrained from shooting a heron for its plumes with the knowledge that agents of the state president could shoot it with impunity—they participated in the display of the state’s increasing penetration of society. The repetition of these routine acts of submission made the acceptance of Gomecista power the norm and, as they became increasingly ubiquitous, they instilled a sense that the regime’s continuation was, if not inevitable, at least highly probable.⁶⁶

The diffusion of rituals of submission contributed to one of the distinctive hallmarks of Gómez’s rule—his psychological hold on the Venezuelan people.⁶⁷ One of the first 20th century Latin American rulers to establish an effective reign of terror, Gómez succeeded in convincing ordinary people that they were under constant surveillance—some to the extent that they attributed to Gómez omniscient powers as a *brujo*.⁶⁸ The regime’s security network and the stories of brutality that seeped out of its prisons certainly contributed to Venezuelans’ fear of the regime, but the way in which Gomez’s business networks saturated society, transforming everyday transactions into rituals of submission to the regime, undoubtedly contributed to Venezuelans’ sense that Gomecismo was too entrenched, too omnipresent, to be overthrown. As evidence of state power in daily life became ever more pervasive, it became easier to believe that Gómez controlled all and knew all, and that swift punishment surely awaited those who resisted his authority.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that Venezuelans undertook a variety of actions to protest against the profiteering which, in the eyes of many, formed the regime’s

⁶⁶ For a more extensive discussion of the role of ritual in normalizing state power, see William Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, editors, *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994).

reason for being. One of the most ideologically incisive protests against Gomecista profiteering came in 1928. In the springtime of that year, following the anti-Gómez student demonstrations of February, rumors began to circulate in Caracas that the government would soon purchase the Hotel Miramar in the coastal town of Macuto as part of a supposed plan to advance tourism. Caraqueños already knew that the hotel belonged to Gómez, and that he had used public funds to construct it. Therefore, the rumored purchase, at the price of 5 million bolívares (equal to almost US\$1 million at the time), would mark the second time that the national treasury had paid for the facility. As if this were not enough, the hotel suffered from a poor reputation and was often empty--in short, the government was about to acquire a dubious property while adding to Gómez's immense fortune. Then one morning, a sign was found hanging from the statue of Simón Bolívar in the main plaza of the city. It read simply:

FOR SALE

Bs. 5,000,000

By J.V. Gómez

Some days later, a decree finalized the sale of the Hotel Miramar, at the same price indicated by the placard hung in the Plaza Bolívar. Gómez made his deal, but was subjected to public humiliation in the process.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Germán Carrera Damas, "Gómez el hombre," in Arturo Sosa et al., *Gómez, Gomecismo y Antigomecismo* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1987), pp. 198-9.

⁶⁸ Rourke, *Tyrant*, p. 133.

⁶⁹ Engert to Department of State, 25 May 1928. 831.00/1380, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

The anonymous sign in the Plaza Bolívar must have delighted Caraqueños as a confirmation of their celebrated *viveza*—that combination of cleverness, daring, and wit which forms a central aspect of the reputed Venezuelan character. Moreover, the symbolism of the sign’s location made it a devastating piece of political theater. By juxtaposing the issue of profiteering to the personage of Bolívar, those who secreted the sign into the plaza struck at one of the ideological foundations of the regime and aligned themselves with the rhetoric of the student movement. The Gómez regime—like several of its predecessors, and like every Venezuelan regime since—elevated Bolívar as a unifying symbol of the nation, propagated a selective version of Bolívar's ideology, and sought to identify itself as the sole agent of the Liberator's vision for national development.⁷⁰ Rather than reject the relevance of Bolívar, the students who mobilized against the regime in February of 1928 had struggled to appropriate Bolivarian symbols for their cause by stressing the civic, democratic and nationalistic elements of the Liberator's (often contradictory) legacy.⁷¹ What emerged was the outline of a debate that has reproduced itself in Venezuelan politics, in varying forms, down to the present, as each side sought to identify itself as the true carrier of Bolívar's legacy. Increasingly, political legitimacy divorced from Bolivarian ideology became unimaginable.⁷² This emergent ideological contest endowed the sign hanging from the Liberator's statue with an undeniable resonance. The simple placard signaled, as the students had, that Venezuelans did not passively accept the symbolic associations forged by official

⁷⁰ Rourke, *Tyrant*, pp. 137-8; and Caraballo Perichi, *Obras públicas*, pp. 71-3.

⁷¹ The students were motivated in part by opposition to Gómez’s “política interior de peculado y monopolio.” Rómulo Betancourt and Miguel Otero Silva, as quoted in Arturo Sosa, “La generación estudiantil del año de 28,” in *Gómez, Gomecismo y Antigomecismo*, p. 12. U.S. observers also felt that much of the sympathy for the students reflected bourgeois opposition to Gomecista business monopolies. Engert to Secretary of State, 7 March 1928, 831.00/1350, microcopy no. 366.

rhetoric. It served notice that the issue of corruption could become an instrument with which to prize the Bolivarian mantel from Gomez's shoulders.

As the lynchpin of Gomecista profiteering, the cattle and beef monopoly naturally became an arena of resistance to the regime. Arévalo Cedeño's transition from aggrieved cattle trader to rebel leader has already been mentioned, and his was presumably not a unique case. Such rebels may have been among the rustlers who stole cattle from Gómez's ranches—an inherently political theft, given the thieves' access to easier pickings elsewhere, and given their certain pursuit by local officials who dared not rest until they apprehended the culprits.⁷³ Sometimes the cattle monopoly played a role in provoking direct, violent action against the Gomecista clique. Thus an assassination attempt against Eustoquio Gómez, the hated president of the state of Táchira and a cousin of the dictator, coincided with growing outrage against his efforts to assert complete control over various enterprises, including the regional cattle trade.⁷⁴

The profiteering of José María García, one of Gómez's principal business partners and political allies, provoked a deadly riot in the city of Maracaibo, the capital of the western state of Zulia. Appointed president of Zulia in 1914, García supervised Gómez's local investments in sugar and railroads, as well as the cattle business in Encontrados that the two owned in partnership with other officials for the purpose of supplying Maracaibo

⁷²Germán Carrera Damas, *El culto a Bolívar: esbozo para un estudio de la historia de las ideas en Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1973).

⁷³Jurado to Gómez, 1 April 1914, in *Los hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 2, pp. 77-8.

⁷⁴Emil Sauer, the US consul in Maracaibo, visited Táchira and reported on Eustoquio Gómez's abusive business and political tactics, especially "the beef, hide, and rum monopolies," in Sauer to Secretary of State, 31 March 1919, 831.00/898, NARA, microcopy no. 366. Following the attempt on Eustoquio Gómez's life in early May 1919 (in which the state president suffered several gunshot wounds), Sauer indicated again that he believed the unrest in Táchira derived largely from Gómez's attempt to monopolize key enterprises. Sauer to Secretary of State, 3 May 1919, 3 May 1919, 831.00/905, NARA, microcopy no. 366.

with beef.⁷⁵ By 1916 the population of Maracaibo had come to hate García “because of the numerous monopolies, severe taxation, gambling concessions, etc., from which he was supposed to derive a private revenue of some \$800 a day.”⁷⁶ The city rejoiced when, in the spring of 1916, Gómez recalled García to Caracas and Alberto Aranguren became acting state president. According to the U.S. consul in Maracaibo, “Aranguren, immediately upon entering on his duties, did away with these objectionable taxes and monopolies and even started the paving of streets with concrete, which so pleased the people that voluntary contributions poured in to help the good work.” Thus Aranguren, aside from curbing monopolies, spent available revenues for public improvements instead of pocketing the funds himself. García’s imminent return caused a wave of unrest and “even open threats to kill him.” The despised executive arrived in the port under armed guard, but an angry crowd gathered nonetheless and someone opened fire at García with a pistol. “Little Nero,” as the people called him, escaped unharmed but in the ensuing gun battle ten people—two of them soldiers—were killed and about twenty-five wounded. García continued as state president, but without much pretense of popular support.

Occasionally, protests against the regime’s systematic profiteering forced modifications in the terms of domination, signaling the kind of give-and-take that historians have called the “negotiation of rule.”⁷⁷ Gómez even proved flexible in his management of the cattle monopoly. In the early 1920s, at the height of the postwar depression in the cattle industry, an alliance of Venezuelan bankers, merchants and

⁷⁵ Linder, “Agriculture and Rural Society,” pp. 230-33; see also the correspondence between García and Gómez collected in *Los Hombres del Benemérito*, vol. 1, pp. 345-73.

⁷⁶ Donald (U.S. consul at Maracaibo) to Secretary of State, 6 June 1916, 831.00/773, NARA, microcopy no. 366. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this source.

ranchers, as well as a British cattle company with considerable holdings in Venezuela, petitioned the government to lower or reduce the taxes on the cattle industry.⁷⁸ Selective enforcement of these levies—especially the transit tax on cattle crossing state borders—had long constituted a cornerstone of the Gomecista monopoly. In response to these petitions, however, Gómez made several highly publicized moves ostensibly intended to free the cattle trade. Upon reassuming the presidency in 1922, he issued a circular to state presidents in the llanos requesting that they end the transit tax. Some taxes were lowered or eliminated, the price of meat in Caracas dropped by as much as 50 percent, and some observers speculated that Gómez might actually end his control of cattle and beef markets.⁷⁹ But the states and municipalities kept certain cattle taxes in place. Some observers speculated that, despite the public posturing, Gómez did not want to dismantle his monopoly completely and that he must have secretly instructed the state presidents to retain some taxes.⁸⁰ Or perhaps state executives in the impoverished llanos simply refused to abandon one of their few sources of public revenue. For whatever the reason, the reduced cattle taxes remained in place through the end of the regime.⁸¹ Cattle dealers operating outside the Gomecista network could at least survive, if not prosper.

The give and take between the regime and society at times extended to the way that Gómez rotated state presidents from region to region. Communities that dared to protest against an especially abusive president could sometimes win a more lenient

⁷⁷ Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*.

⁷⁸ "Venezuela Annual Report, 1922," pp. 7-8, PRO, FO 371/8530; Galavís to Gómez, 13 June 1922, *BAHM* no. 60 (1969), pp. 203-04; R. S. Beak to Minister of Development (Fomento), 20 July 1922, *BAHM* no. 60 (1969), pp. 205-208; and the copies of correspondence enclosed with a card from Beak to Beaumont, 27 February 1923, PRO, FO 199/ 219, especially the copy of Beak to Lecuna, 26 February 1923.

⁷⁹ Beaumont to Balfour, 13 July 1922, PRO, FO 199/188; and "Venezuela, Annual Report, 1922," pp. 7-8, PRO, FO 371/8530.

⁸⁰ Beaumont to Curzon, 26 May 1923, PRO, FO 199/ 188.

successor as their next state executive. General Silverio González presided over a particularly corrupt and abusive administration in the eastern state of Sucre from 1915 to 1921. The *jefes civiles* in rural districts of the state regularly extorted money from plantation owners by threatening to drag their laborers into the army, while the police in Cumaná (Sucre's capital city) imposed petty "fines" on merchants who failed to display the national flag on specified holidays.⁸² When Gómez decided to remove González from office (he would later be named president of other states), the former executive and his allies became the targets of popular retribution on the streets of Cumaná. A mob gathered outside González's home, yelling insults, and only dispersed when he threatened them with a pistol. Removed from office at the same time as González was Cumaná jefe civil Clemente Soto, dubbed "The Hand that Squeezes" because of his innovative methods of extorting money. When Soto, deprived of protection, attempted to leave the city, Cumaná's taxi drivers turned the tables by charging him inflated fees and then throwing him out of their taxis after driving only a few blocks towards his destination.⁸³

To salve the wounds created by González and his cohorts, Gómez sent Juan Alberto Ramírez to Sucre "to soothe of the spirits of the Cumaneses [residents of Cumaná] upset by the arbitrary acts of González."⁸⁴ The tumultuous demonstrations of approval that greeted Ramírez's arrival were, according to a minor official in the state government, a final expression of repudiation against González more than a sincere welcome for the new—and unknown—appointee. Ramírez warned officials in Sucre against continuing the extortions of the previous administration with the admonition,

⁸¹ "Memorandum on the present Conditions, Economic and Commercial, in Venezuela," enclosed in Keeling to Simon, 2 March 1934, PRO, FO 371/17618.

⁸² Brett to Department of State, 23 September 1915, 831.00/753, NARA, microcopy no. 366; and Parada, *De Ocumare*, p. 74.

“Look what happened to González because of these things.”⁸⁵ In 1925 the pacific Ramírez embarked on a similar mission of reconciliation when he replaced Eustoquio Gómez as president of Táchira, ending what was probably the most abusive rule suffered by any state during the dictatorship.

Popular protest modified rather than transformed the dynamics of the regime. Resistance to profiteering could win a temporary reprieve for an especially exploited region, could loosen the Gomecista cattle monopoly at the margins, or could publicly ridicule the Bolivarian pretensions of the dictator. But opposition to profiteering never altered the fundamental character of the regime, nor did it seriously threaten Gómez’s continuation in power. Indeed, by dramatizing the popular wrath that seethed beneath the superficial peace imposed by the dictatorship, occasional popular resistance probably strengthened the regime by discouraging any permanent breach between Gómez and his occasionally restless collaborators. Periodically reminded that offended citizens would seize any opportunity to take revenge against the officials who gouged them, Gomecistas had ample motivation to minimize their differences and present a united front against the waiting masses.

The New Regime and the Negotiation of Rule

In the end, the Venezuelan people had to wait until Gómez’s death to claim their full measure of revenge. The protests that exploded across much of Venezuela in late 1935 and early 1936 provided the final—and perhaps most successful—episode in the history of Venezuelans’ attempt to end the systematic, unbridled profiteering which had

⁸³ Parada, *De Ocumare*, p. 68-9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

defined the Gomecista regime. Undoubtedly, anger over profiteering—as much as a desire for political democracy—motivated Venezuelans who attacked Gomecista property and officials after the dictator’s demise.

Within days of Gómez’s death on 17 December 1935, mobs in Caracas attacked the homes and businesses of Gomecista officials. The rioters demonstrated obvious discipline, limiting themselves to assaults on properties somehow linked to the regime, making clear their political intent. Even British diplomats—not normally sympathetic to looters—praised the crowds’ restraint and selectivity.⁸⁶ Amid calls for a free market in meats, crowds systematically sacked the retail shops of the beef company established by Gómez and his chief collaborators less than two years before.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the protests spread far beyond Caracas. In the port cities of La Guaira and Puerto Cabello, crowds followed the Caraqueños’ example and looted the properties of known Gomecistas.⁸⁸ The General’s cattle estates in the llanos suffered vigorous attacks.⁸⁹ Peasants in Crespo District retaliated for Gomecistas’ appropriation of public lands by attacking haciendas, burning fences, and murdering one of the largest landowners in the district.⁹⁰ In sum, much of the popular fury that exploded in late 1935 and early 1936 was intended as retribution against Gomecista profiteering.

These protests clearly influenced the nature of the government led by General Eleazar López Contreras, Gómez’s Minister of War and successor as president. Considered personally honest—despite having served and admired Gómez for many

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 73-5.

⁸⁶ MacGregor to Eden, 24 December 1935, PRO, FO 371/19845.

⁸⁷ Nicholson to Department of State, 30 December 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, National Archives (College Park, MD).

⁸⁸ MacGregor to Eden, 2 January 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845.

⁸⁹ Pitaluga to López Contreras, 25 December 1935, in Eleazar López Contreras, *Proceso Político Social, 1928-1936* 2nd edition (Caracas: Editorial Ancora, 1955), p. 103.

years—he recognized the legitimate grievances created by Gomecista profiteering. López’s adherents easily defeated a gangster-like grab for power by Eustoquio Gómez, widely considered the leader of the most abusive and corrupt wing of the official faction. López gained additional popularity by dismantling some of the most notorious Gomecista enterprises, including the markets in basic food items. As the U.S. ambassador reported, “General López Contreras’s popularity continues. The cancellation of several monopolies has done much to enhance the belief that he is firm in his intention to furnish honest government.”⁹¹ López also moved quickly to cut profiteering in the military, which reportedly led to grumbling among officers not accustomed to living on their official salaries alone.⁹²

The fate of Gómez’s personal fortune proved a more difficult issue for López. Public opinion called for the national government to confiscate the General’s fortune, but López, admiring the late dictator, balked at an action that would openly label his predecessor as corrupt.⁹³ Initially, the government took the position that anyone with a financial claim against the dictator—or any official in his regime—should pursue the matter through the courts. Still, the press and the public called for the confiscation of all of Gómez’s property. Some saw the issue as symbolic—a test of López’s commitment to break with the past.⁹⁴ Finally, López relented and allowed the confiscation of the General’s entire fortune, which the national congress approved in September 1936.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Yarrington, *A Coffee Frontier*, pp. 181-92.

⁹¹ Nicholson to Department of State, 30 December 1935, 831.00/1557, Box 5785, Record Group 59, National Archives (College Park, MD).

⁹² MacGregor to Eden, 11 February 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845.

⁹³ MacGregor to Eden (with enclosed newspaper article), 24 January 1936, PRO, FO 371/19845.

⁹⁴ Nicholson to Secretary of State, 28 January 1936, 831.00/1572, Record Group 59, Box 5785, National Archives (College Park, MD).

⁹⁵ The confiscation decrees are reproduced in Dupuy, *Propiedades del General*, pp. 147-9.

Symbolically, then, the nation joined in repudiating the corruption of the past. More concretely, the boundaries of the state's power over society shifted under López. The systematic profiteering of the Gómez period—defined by forced sales of property, monopolies supported by the use of state power, and the private appropriation of property belonging to those out of favor with the ruling clique—did not survive into the new era. To be sure, corruption continued under López; indeed, rising oil revenues multiplied the opportunities to divert public funds to private use. But the daily, degrading, coercive extraction of resources from the populace, backed ultimately by the threat of arbitrary imprisonment or worse, ceased to provide the central logic of the Venezuelan state (at least for the time being). The protests that followed Gómez's death had accomplished at least a partial shift in the demarcation of state power over society.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that a focus on the systematic profiteering of Gomecista officials offers a valuable window through which to view the process of state formation in early 20th century Venezuela. Profiteering required the cooperation of officials up and down the political hierarchy and led to the creation of business partnerships, formal or informal, between Gómez and officials throughout the country, strengthening bonds among state officials. In some cases (such as the cattle cartel) these partnerships could last for years and serve as the basis for on-going enterprises of production and exchange. In other instances (such as the confiscations in Los Caños) such alliances served as vehicles for the outright seizure of property from entrepreneurs who could not claim the regime's protection. Whatever their nature, these Gomecista alliances operated according

to an etiquette of corruption which dictated that the spoils of all enterprises be widely distributed. Political power underwrote these various enterprises to such an extent that, for many Venezuelans, the construction of a centralized state under Gómez must have seemed indistinguishable from the construction of an integrated, nation-wide system of profiteering.

Analyzing the Gomecista regime as a business enterprise has the advantage of directing our attention towards the relationship between the state and society—a neglected area in most studies of Venezuelan state formation during this period. Interpretations emphasizing oil, international diplomacy, the reform of the treasury, or the professionalization of the army reveal little about how state power was made concrete in the lives of most Venezuelans, or about their attempts to shape the boundaries of state power.⁹⁶ For many Venezuelans, Gomecista profiteering provided the primary arena for their experience of the centralizing state. The regime's ability to transform commonplace economic transactions into acts of submission to the regime infused society with the sense of a consolidated state, secure in its power.

But if profiteering advanced state power—cementing Gomecista alliances, normalizing popular submission—it simultaneously provoked acts of resistance that ranged from humiliating public satire to violent rebellion. Popular resistance at times caused a modification in the system of domination under Gómez, but only the protests against profiteering that broke out after his death contributed to a more dramatic shift in the relationship between Venezuelans and the state. Thus, in the end, the Gómez regime stands as a unique period in the history of Venezuela's centralized state. This 27-year era

bore the indelible mark of Juan Vicente Gómez, a grasping, upwardly mobile rancher, who, in his own words, was “always thinking of cattle deals.”

⁹⁶ For a valuable exception to this trend, see the discussion of Venezuelan oil workers and the state in Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 191-273.