

Jan 9. 7. 71 The Latest Bolivian Coup

The embittered, xenophobic radicalism of the last decade in Bolivia is a product of the mountains, where poverty is most intense and industry is largely mining. By its nature, mining originally meant heavy investments by large foreign corporations with their labor concentrated in isolated company towns. The struggle over nationalization simply substituted the government itself as the target of the miners' wrath. Recent Bolivian governments, under a succession of generals, had come increasingly under the influence of the miners' unions and their allies among the students and the clergy. La Paz, where one such government recently fell, lies at an altitude of 13,000 feet within sight of the central spine of the Andes. Santa Cruz, where the coup was organized, is several hundred miles to the east on the plains. The population is less dense there, and incomes are substantially higher.

Bolivia's new regime says that it intends to reestablish a cordial relationship with the United States, but beyond that announcement its political direction is not very clear. The losers, following tradition, accuse the United States of having initiated the coup. In this case, they point out, a U.S. Air Force major had been holding conversations with the exiled Bolivian colonel who is now his country's new president. (In Washington, the State Department is currently diluting its blanket denials with earnest promises to try to find out what really happened.) On present evidence, the major's rather vague role did not require La Paz to show much gratitude to the United States; now that the incident is public knowledge, the United States is likely to get even less.

There is more to Bolivian politics than CIA plots and palace skirmishes. The revolution of 1952 was probably the most profound ever carried out in South America. For the 12 years that followed,

presidential terms began and ended in orderly elections. But then the original revolutionary party fragmented and the succession of generals began. A coup in 1964, another in 1969, another in 1970, preceded the coup two weeks ago. The most interesting element in the latest government is the reappearance of the old revolutionary party in the cabinet. There is clearly an attempt here to return to the last effective formula for stability.

But stability is going to be a very relative term in Bolivia. We all like to think that economic growth means civic peace, but the evidence runs hard to the contrary. While Bolivia is still the poorest of the South American countries, it is growing less poor and such a journey upward is never smooth. It will be particularly difficult for Bolivia because its economy is also the extreme example of dependence upon a single product—tin, the price of which fluctuates wildly—for its foreign exchange.

Bolivia remains an embarrassment to all of the foreign missionaries' competing theories of political uplift. When the romantic revolutionaries of the Cuban school landed, they expected the peasants to pour down out of the hills. In fact, the peasants drew back suspiciously and the government's troops hunted down Che Guevara. The Soviets, in their cautious way, have been offering a smelter here and a factory there for some time but, at least for the moment, they haven't much to show for it. As for the United States, since the early 1950's it has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in aid for Bolivia. If that money has brought a somewhat better life to some of Bolivia's people, it still has not generated anything approaching democracy. To build a tradition of responsive government takes a great deal more time than the United States, with the optimism of the rich, ever expected two decades ago.