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AIR MAIL

Habana, February 3, 1941.

No. 1505.

Subject: Extremely serious situation which has developed between President Batista and Colonel Pedraza, involving the armed forces of Cuba.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

For extremely limited circulation in the Department, to be determined by the Secretary and the Undersecretary.

The Honorable
The Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

I have the honor to inform the Department that an extremely serious situation has developed between President Batista and Colonel Pedraza and that there is real danger of revolution which may or may not involve civil strife. The initial information which reached me in this connection, I transmitted to the Department in my despatch No. 1500 of February 1, 1941.

The situation is briefly as follows. Several weeks ago it was decided by the Government, in accord with Colonel Pedraza the head of the Army, that clandestine gambling, which is rampant throughout the Island, should be stopped. Very strict orders were quietly issued by Colonel Pedraza, the head of the Army, and Colonel Garcia, the head of the Police, through the various Army commanders and heads of the Police throughout the country. Whether these orders were issued as an honest endeavor to clean up this clandestine gambling, which is eating up so large a

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part of the meager resources of the Cuban masses, or whether it was an endeavor to eventually increase the gains which certain members of the Government and armed forces have been getting from gambling in general, is not relevant in this immediate discussion. The fact is that the orders issued were formal and were being carried through in a drastic manner.

Some days ago, Mrs. Amadeo López Castro, who is the wife of Amadeo López Castro, now Minister of the Presidency, wished to secure the right for a charitable organization in one of the provincial cities to organize a lottery. Through her husband, who is one of the men enjoying the close confidence and friendship of President Batista, the President gave instructions that this lottery was to be permitted and gave orders to this effect to Colonel Garcia, the chief of police. Colonel Garcia protested that such an exception should be made on the ground that the Government had given the most definite orders that such lotteries and gambling were not to be permitted. Such an exception would weaken seriously the strong attitude which the Army commanders and Police had taken throughout the Island. President Batista became very angry and issued orders that Colonel Garcia should be removed as head of the Police, and it was his intention to place Colonel Benitez at the head thereof. Under this pressure, Colonel Garcia indicated his readiness to resign, but immediately got in touch with Colonel Pedraza, with Colonel Gonzalez, the head of the Navy, and others.

On receiving this information Colonel Pedraza became very much upset and ordered the Army and Navy to remain in barracks on Friday afternoon, January 31. A meeting was held at Camp Columbia in the Army headquarters at which high-ranking officers of the Army and of the Navy were present. At this meeting, Colonel Gonzalez, the head of the Navy, endeavored to get the support of the Army in informing the Government that the decree issued that day, which removed from the jurisdiction of the Navy certain functions such as the protection of the customshouses, light house facilities, etc., should be put back into the Treasury and other Departments where they had been before the September 1933 Revolution. It was decided at this meeting that Colonel Gonzalez and the Navy would have to accept this decree eliminating these functions of the Navy.

The following morning, February 1, Colonel Pedraza, accompanied by Colonel Gonzalez, went to the police headquarters where the resignation of Colonel Garcia as head of the police was accepted "for reasons of health". Colonel Pedraza made remarks at this time in which he highly praised the services which Colonel Garcia and the police had rendered, and indicated that he would function as chief of police.

(Pedraza)

From this

From this meeting at police headquarters, Colonel Pedraza went to the Palace and saw President Batista. There had taken place between Colonel Pedraza and President Batista the night before a heated conversation over the telephone in which long-standing differences between the two came to a head and during which Colonel Pedraza made distinct menaces to the President. During the conversation which took place in the Palace on the morning of February 1, Colonel Pedraza informed the President that the status quo of the September 1933 Revolution existed still so far as distribution of authority was concerned. Colonel Pedraza said that he had never given up his position as chief of police and that he had merely delegated his authority to Colonel Garcia. (It is well known that Colonel Garcia owed his position to Colonel Pedraza and looked to him as his immediate superior.) Colonel Pedraza informed the President that he had no authority to remove Colonel Garcia as the head of the police without consulting with him and he told the President that he had just come from the police headquarters where the acceptance of the resignation of Colonel Garcia had been announced, and where his own direct assumption of the duties of head of the police also had been announced to the press. Colonel Pedraza further said to the President that his attempt to make Colonel Benitez head of the police, without consulting with him, was a further violation of their relationships and understandings and of the status quo of the September 1933 Revolution. If the President felt that he could depend upon the loyalty of Colonel Benitez, he had erred and that Colonel Benitez, as well as all the other colonels, had given their assurance of loyalty to him, Colonel Pedraza. There must have been further exchanges during this conversation with which I am not familiar, but it is certain that the conversation did not in any way heal the breech between Colonel Pedraza and the President, but rather widened it. It is definite that Colonel Pedraza informed the President that the Army was definitely with him (Colonel Pedraza) and that the President could not count on its support.

After this conversation, the troops and Navy were no longer confined to barracks according to instructions given by Colonel Pedraza.

Of the foregoing, and the tense and dangerous situation under the surface, nothing was known to the public or even members of the Government on Saturday afternoon at 6 o'clock. On the afternoon of February 1, at 6 o'clock, I had an important conversation on other matters with the Minister of State, Dr. Cortina, and it was obvious from the conversation that, although he knew there had been some difficulties over the removal of Colonel Garcia, he knew nothing of the really tense situation which had developed between President Batista and Colonel Pedraza. Those members of the Government who knew

of the happenings on the evening of January 31 were under the impression that the situation had been straightened out. There had been nothing in the press and there has been nothing in the press up to this moment, except a brief statement by President Batista which appeared in the press of February 2 to the effect that there was no difficulty in the Army.

Yesterday, the Minister of Defense, Dr. Ramos, came to see me and said that an extremely serious situation had developed between the President and civil Government on one side, and the Army and the Navy on the other. He recounted to me in strict confidence what I have set forth in this despatch. Dr. Ramos said that in his opinion the situation could not be worse and that he could not foresee developments clearly. The break between the President and Colonel Pedraza was as definite as it could be. President Batista had felt that he could, in case of difficulties, rely on certain officers of the Army, such as Colonel Benitez. It was now clear to the President that he could not count on the loyalty of the Army, or of the Navy, or of any of its higher officers. The President had always felt that if it came to the worst, he could depend upon Colonel Benitez, in command in the Province of Matanzas, and if necessary could leave the country from there. It was now clear that Colonel Benitez, whom the President had wished to make chief of Police to succeed Colonel Garcia, was with Colonel Pedraza. Colonel Pedraza had with him the Army, and the Navy, and was now in direct charge of the police as well. In other words, the President was sitting in the Palace without any support from the armed forces which could oblige him to leave the country at any moment.

Dr. Ramos pointed out that Colonel Pedraza was usually a very calm and understanding person, but could, if aroused, be a man of much greater decision than President Batista. Recent events had aroused Colonel Pedraza and his present situation was of the most definite character and, with this support behind him, he was able to take any action that he chose to take.

I discussed with Dr. Ramos the background of the situation. He said that Colonel Batista was a real democrat. He had resigned as head of the Army to enter the Presidential campaign. He had wished to be elected as the Constitutional President of Cuba. It was his desire to maintain the Constitution and to act as a Constitutional President. To achieve this end, he realized that many abuses which existed in the Government would have to be corrected as a basis of financial and economic cooperation with the United States. Naturally, the politicians and many of the civil authorities were entirely prepared to support the President in limiting the powers of the Army, but they had wished to go too fast. He (Dr. Ramos) on many occasions had to counsel members of the Cabinet

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and the President to proceed with caution so as not to arouse the military who, seeing power slipping from their hands, might take over the Government. The President had proceeded with caution on a program of subordinating the Army. The distrust of the Army and of the Navy had steadily increased. It was clear, for example, that the President had determined to eliminate Colonel Gonzalez as head of the Navy because of his improper practices. Colonel Pedraza was quite prepared to go through with this also, but felt that it should be done slowly and that subordinates should be removed first. The orders against gambling had disturbed the Army, but they were prepared to accept the situation. The action of the President with respect to the removal of Colonel Garcia, without consulting Colonel Pedraza, had brought things to a head. The Army officers felt that the removal of Colonel Garcia would shortly be followed by the removal of Colonel Gonzalez, and then, most likely, of themselves.

Dr. Ramos said that he saw certain solutions of the situation. First, President Batista and Colonel Pedraza might make up their differences and arrive at a working understanding. This was the only one of the alternatives which he saw possible without the most serious consequences for Cuba. Second, Colonel Pedraza could definitely take charge of the situation and assume the position which Colonel Batista had held for so many years with respect to President Laredo Brú. That is that Colonel Pedraza and the Army would definitely control the Government, and Colonel Batista as President accept the same rôle as that into which he had put President Laredo Brú. Dr. Ramos did not see President Batista accepting this situation, and not accepting it would involve his leaving the country. Third, President Batista could ask for our assistance in maintaining Constitutional Government and his own position. Dr. Ramos was of the opinion that President Batista would not ask for such assistance from us and would probably "shoot himself first". Dr. Ramos did not say that the President had made such a statement recently, but I gathered that the President at one time or another had indicated that he would rather "shoot himself" than ask for our assistance. I can quite believe this to be the attitude of the President. Fourth, the President might make this situation clear to the country, which would result in civil strife but with the Army certain to control.

I asked Dr. Ramos how he saw the situation as of that moment (noon, Sunday, February 2). He said that as the situation stood, the President was in the Palace quite helpless. Colonel Pedraza had the armed forces and the police behind him solidly. The President and Colonel Pedraza were both highly excited and as far apart as the two poles. He felt sure nothing would happen during the day. Even most of the members of the Cabinet were utterly unaware of the situation. They would have a day to think things over. He (Dr. Ramos) was to see Colonel Pedraza this morning.

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I expressed to Dr. Ramos my appreciation of his coming in to see me. Dr. Ramos said that he could not do otherwise and that he was taking all the risks involved. I feel sure that his visit was made on his own initiative and not at the request or suggestion of either Colonel Batista or Colonel Pedraza. I said to Dr. Ramos that I could conceive of nothing more disastrous for Cuba than to permit revolution, civil strife or disorder to occur at this time. After a period of years, Cuba had returned to Constitutional Government. The President had been duly elected and had taken office under the Constitution. It would be for Cuba, and in the whole interAmerican picture, a great disaster if Constitutional Government should be overthrown. We were in a serious situation internationally and the peace of the Americas was definitely threatened. At such a time, social or political disorders in any of the American Republics could have the most undesirable consequences. I was sure that, with time for reflection, both the President and Colonel Pedraza would realize this.

I said that the internal situation in Cuba, economically and socially, was most difficult. European markets were closed to her. Cuba was more and more dependent upon us economically and, of course, for her defense. Under our general program of cooperation with the other American Republics, we were prepared to cooperate very fully with Cuba in the solution of her problems so far as we could do so. We had shown our good will. The sugar arrangement was nearing completion. We had sent this agricultural survey party here. If there were internal dissension in Cuba, it would make it exceedingly difficult for us to carry through our program. If there were civil strife, it would bring about a period of suffering for Cuba. I did not see how the Army, taking over control of the Government, could in the end help the Army. If President Batista and Colonel Pedraza could not arrange their difficulties in an amicable and satisfactory manner, and stable Government be maintained here, it would be bad in the end for the political fortunes of both. I could not see how either of them would have anything to gain by not composing the situation.

I said, of course, that there was nothing I could do immediately, but that if the President and Colonel Pedraza wished me to meet them at some place in the country, where the situation could be talked over amicably, I would be very glad to meet with them as a friend of both, as the maintenance of a completely tranquil situation in Cuba was also of great interest to our Government. Dr. Ramos said that he would keep my willingness to meet with them at some quiet place in the country in mind in the conversations which he would have with Colonel Pedraza and the President today.

I consider the situation which has developed as one of really great seriousness, and if Colonel Pedraza so wishes he can force the President to leave the country. I have realized that the relations between them were not as good as they should be, but I did not see the situation developing in any such manner as that with which we are faced today. Colonel Pedraza is usually very calm and very understanding. He has, I have always believed, felt great loyalty to the President. There is no doubt in my mind that President Batista has been influenced in his actions since he became President by two considerations. First, he has taken pride in being a Constitutional President of Cuba and he wishes to govern Constitutionally. To do this, he has realized that he must restrict gradually the powers of the Army. Second, he has not wished to be in the same position with respect to the Army that former President Laredo Brú was in with respect to him. President Batista realized that he could not do without the Army, but he wished it to be subordinate to him rather than to have it control him. For this reason he undoubtedly had in mind changes in the Army and the Navy.

He also realized that in order to secure financial and economic assistance from us, certain changes would have to take place in the Army and Navy in order that administrative reforms could be carried through. Aside from this, I think he genuinely desired to stop certain abuses in order that the public revenues might be augmented. He realized that he would have to proceed slowly and cautiously. He can, however, be arbitrary and choleric and he made a primary mistake in forcing this situation with Colonel Pedraza over Colonel Garcia.

Colonel Pedraza is in many respects a much more sound, sober and understanding man than President Batista. Colonel Pedraza is basically more friendly to the United States than is President Batista. He is much more understanding of many problems, economic, financial and social, as well as political and defense, than is President Batista. He is more calm and more considered than the President. He has, I believe, had real loyalty to the President. He has been willing to cooperate in fiscal and administrative reforms. He is perhaps more understanding of the necessity of this than the President. He was prepared to slowly eliminate officers from the Army and the Navy who have been guilty of mal-practice. He has, for instance, been quite prepared to have replaced Colonel Gonzalez, as head of the Navy, but now that this action has been taken by the President with respect to Colonel Garcia, without consultation with him, he is supporting Colonel Gonzalez. The officers of the Army and Navy, including those who would be willing to see Colonel Gonzalez put out, have had their fears come to a head through this action by the President with respect to Colonel Garcia. Colonel Pedraza undoubtedly feels with them, that if the President can act this way with regard to Colonel Garcia, tomorrow it will be Colonel Gonzalez, and then afterwards others including Colonel Pedraza. In other words, rightly or wrongly, Colonel Pedraza feels that his own position

is in danger and this, together with the fact that the President removed the chief of police without consulting him, has turned him from the calm considered person, which he usually is, into the determined individual who can also be capable of the most drastic action.

The situation is undoubtedly serious, as Colonel Pedraza is in the position to, and so far as I can learn, in the mood to, take some drastic action. As he is generally a very calm and composed person, there is at least a considerable probability that the situation between him and the President will be composed. I think it must be recognized, however, that a forcible overthrow of the Government, which may or may not involve some bloodshed, is possible.

I have deemed it inadvisable to transmit information by cable in view of the necessity of giving the Department a complete picture which I could only do through this airmail despatch. I shall keep the Department currently informed of any developments.

Respectfully yours,

GEORGE S. MESSERSMITH

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