In Cuba with Wood

It strikes me . . . as highly romantic, 
that the pearl of the Antilles that Spain’s grandees 
proved unable to govern, was set on its feet 
as a nation . . . by an ex-army doctor, 
a second lieutenant of cavalry, a first lieutenant 
of infantry . . . and a German-Jew top sergeant. 
HERMANN HAGEDORN TO FRANK ROSS McCOY

With the Santiago campaign at an end, the men of the Tenth Cavalry departed Cuba for a detention camp at Montauk Point, Long Island, where they remained until medical authorities certified them as free from communicable diseases. Following convalescent leave, McCoy rejoined his regiment there in late August 1898. Although still a second lieutenant, he now commanded a succession of cavalry troops as the Tenth Cavalry shuttled from Montauk Point to Huntsville, Alabama, in October and then to Fort Clarke, Texas, in January 1899. His Cuban experiences having whetted his appetite for adventure, McCoy felt impatient at being relegated to garrison life. Excited by reports of an American campaign against Filipino insurgents, he wired a friend at the War Department to arrange a transfer to the Philippines with a cavalry unit "or [in] any other capacity." But no vacancies existed.

In the spring, his prospects brightened when the War Department ordered his regiment back to Cuba. A sizable force had stayed in Cuba after the war to maintain order and provide a visible American presence. Many units assigned to this role encountered difficulty. Volunteers who had enlisted for the glorious war against Spain lacked the discipline and temperament for occupation duty—they wanted only to go home. Even more serious was the malaria and yellow fever that
were exacting a terrible toll. The War Department was counting on the regulars who replaced the departing volunteers to improve the quality of the occupation force. Army medical authorities also hoped—as events proved, in vain—that black soldiers would be immune to the tropical diseases felling so many white soldiers. Thus, the end of May found McCoy’s Troop A garrisoning the town of Manzanillo, across the Sierra Maestra mountains from Santiago. He confessed to his family that closer and longer acquaintance with the Cuban people only confirmed the low opinion that he had formed so quickly and vigorously in 1898. Overall, however, he found duty with the occupation forces to be to his liking. “After two years of service in the Army,” he told his parents, “after trying it in several parts of the country, in post and in the field, and enjoying all of it, I say it with a good deal of satisfaction that I’m satisfied with my lot.” He added a single caveat that he was not perfectly satisfied, of course, so long as he was deprived of “so much good experience and excitement in the Phillipines [sic].”

Cuba offered an excitement of its own, though of a different sort than that encountered by army officers assigned to recent Pacific acquisitions of the United States. On December 20, 1899, Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood became military governor in Havana, ending the year-long drift of American policy regarding Cuba. In sharp contrast to the modest goals and passive methods of the previous governor, General John R. Brooke, Wood inaugurated a phase of the American occupation that was ambitious in scope and dynamic in character. Unlike Brooke, Wood entered into his responsibilities with a well-defined vision. General Adna R. Chaffee, for a brief, unhappy time the new governor’s chief of staff, observed that Wood was a man “impressed with the idea [that] he has a mission” in Cuba, that he had been “charged with a great transformation.” The objective of that mission, in Wood’s words, was “the establishment . . . in a Latin military colony . . . of a republic modeled closely upon the lines of our own great Anglo-Saxon republic.” Conversion of the ramshackle former Spanish possession into a progressive, efficient society would lay the foundation for a permanent and mutually advantageous Cuban-American partnership, perhaps culminating in outright annexation by the United States.

By all accounts, the conditions existing in Cuba in the early days of the American occupation were appalling. Cuban cities and towns were pestholes. Unable to provide even minimal public services, government had acquired a well-deserved reputation for inefficiency and corruption. According to Wood, the prevalence of old customs and ideas bequeathed by Spain resulted in the “entire destruction of public spirit and interest in good government.” Public institutions lay in shambles. Education was without organization and of little value; prisons were so backward as to be simply medieval; medical facilities were found to be hospitals only in name; taxation was inequitable. The courts had long ceased dispensing justice: “There seemed to be an unlimited number of ways of getting a man into prison,” reported Wood to the War Department, “but unless rich and influential it was difficult for him to find his way out.” Most depressing of all was
the treatment accorded those least able to help themselves. The mentally ill were outcasts, with patients locked in cramped boxes that resembled large dog kennels. The young fared no better. Visiting an orphanage, Wood found children "covered with vermin. . . . Their heads were in many instances lousy, and the dormitories were overrun with bedbugs. . . . In passing through the various dormitories many of the beds were opened. The linen was found soiled with excretions, and in many cases the pillows were well stained with dried pus from affected eyes and ears."\(^{15}\)

Cuba had been too long exploited by Spain and too ravaged by war, Wood believed, to act as the agent of its own salvation. To shed its colonial past and become a suitable partner for the future, Cuba needed help from the United States. In the general’s view, the Americans best suited to provide that help were the military forces already on occupation duty. What Cuba needed, he wrote in 1899, was a “government of the people, for the people, and by the people, under American military supervision.”\(^{16}\) Soon after initiating this experiment in what a friendly journalist labeled “benevolent despotism,” Wood and Chaffee embarked upon a two-week inspection trip up and down the length of Cuba. Traveling by boat, train, and horseback, Wood sought to assess personally the conditions existing throughout the island. His itinerary included a stop at Manzanillo and a visit to the headquarters of the Tenth Cavalry. As Wood prepared to leave, McCoy was detailed to escort his party as far as its next destination. This second encounter with the man he had last seen amidst the gunfire of Kettle Hill proved to be a turning point in McCoy’s life.\(^{7}\)
To the disinterested observer, the burly, handsome, energetic Wood was a bundle of contradictions. Yet few who actually knew Wood were capable of appraising him disinterestedly. More than most figures prominent in public life, he inspired the extremes of either intense animosity or enthusiastic devotion. To his detractors, Wood was an arrogant and ambitious martinet, an insubordinate demagogue, all the more suspect for the irregular pattern of his career: educated not at West Point, but at Harvard; trained as a physician at Harvard Medical School; apparently destined for obscurity as an army surgeon until the Spanish-American War and his wartime friendship with Theodore Roosevelt vaulted him to a senior position in the line army. Wood’s background and determination to make the most of his suddenly transformed career combined to give him an
outlook on the army’s role in national affairs that departed substantially from the narrow ethos of the old Indian-fighting army. Yet this outlook captured with striking precision the military requirements of a nation struggling with the implications of its seemingly inevitable rise to great-power status. Thus, within the army’s ranks, Wood represented something like the model for a new officer.

Many senior army leaders considered Wood to be an upstart. They either did not comprehend or rejected out of hand his new model of officership. But for young officers of McCoy’s generation, Wood represented an approach to military service that possessed enduring appeal. In comparison to more traditional soldiers, Wood’s approach was expansive, taking for granted a broader involvement of the army and individual officers in affairs of state. Wood’s approach also had an affirmative or creative aspect. He viewed the army not simply as an instrument of destruction, but as an agency of positive political and social change primarily abroad and to a lesser extent at home. The values that Wood espoused struck a responsive chord among officers searching for their place in the new empire they had helped win for the United States. They shared his enormous confidence in the rightness of American values. They were drawn to his idealistic vision of remaking societies rather than merely maintaining order within them. They admired and sought to emulate the personal qualities that he exemplified: rectitude, forthrightness, charisma, breadth of vision, a love of the outdoors, and an insatiable appetite for adventure and strenuous activity. Those who admired Wood tended either to be blind to his faults or to have an enormous capacity to forgive them.

“So often I have been disappointed on close contact with big guns,” McCoy told his mother, but not so in this case. Wood was different. The former Rough Rider had already established enviable credentials as a combat leader. Now, however, it was Wood’s stature as “a real statesman of high ideals and of great doings” that impressed McCoy. To a subaltern whose view of the occupation derived from patrolling back roads and chasing stray bandits, introduction to the overall dimensions of American aims in Cuba was eye opening. “What a problem this Cuban one is,” McCoy wrote. Yet even brief contact with Wood convinced McCoy that the governor could overcome any obstacle: To Wood, “all of the quantities seemed to be a,b,c, [whereas] with most men they would have been x,y,z.”

For his part, McCoy made a similarly favorable impression on Wood. Observing the young officer dash into an uncharted river to test its fordability, Chaffee casually expressed interest in having McCoy on his staff. “I am sorry, General,” replied Wood. “I have just made up my mind to have him myself.” It was the sort of opportunity that an intrepid junior officer could hardly resist. On April 21, 1900, McCoy joined Wood’s staff as an aide-de-camp and a member of the intimate circle of subordinates assembled to assist Wood in fulfilling his mission.

As Wood’s aide, McCoy accompanied his chief throughout his daily schedule and found his wide-ranging activities invigorating. As he later recalled, “Wood’s
CHAPTER 2

routine as Military Governor was no routine at all.” The only predictable element was the intense hour of *jai-alai* with which Wood and McCoy regularly began their day. After breakfast, the governor seldom remained in his office, instead seeking further firsthand information on existing conditions and personally inspecting projects undertaken under American auspices. In McCoy’s view, the military government’s earlier ineffectiveness resulted from Brooke’s insistence upon operating “by system and routine, rather than by personal intervention. He did not visit the hospitals and prisons, and, therefore, he did not know of their awful condition.” In contrast, “Wood visited everything everywhere,” from the capital to the farthest reaches of rural Cuba, “and saw with his own eyes what had to be done.” In short, “Wood’s was a personal form of government.”

After accompanying his chief on inspection tours through most of the day, McCoy faced an evening of socializing, attending functions sponsored by well-to-do residents of Havana or helping Wood entertain dignitaries from the United States. McCoy enjoyed these encounters with the social elite, although they tested his uncertain mastery of Spanish. “The girls here talk away and we . . . look intelligent when we’re grooping hard at the beginning of the flow,” he told his parents. “But we try to laugh at the proper time.”

Besides acting as Wood’s aide and personal factotum, McCoy assumed specific responsibility for government finances. A recurring theme of Wood’s administration was the progressive centralization of authority wielded by the military governor. McCoy’s role as Wood’s agent in controlling the government’s disbursements and supervising its finances reflected this centralizing tendency. McCoy’s financial report for the year 1900, published as part of the military governor’s annual report, depicts his contribution to the efficient management of Cuban finances. The effects of Spanish fiscal practices, according to McCoy, were as dismal as the legacy of Spanish rule in general: “At the time of the relinquishment of Spanish sovereignty the [Cuban] treasury was left bare of money, and even many of the records concerning the administration of public moneys were lost.” The “vicious” Spanish provisions for compensating public officials—designed, it seemed, to encourage corruption—excited McCoy’s particular contempt. Graft became so widespread and pronounced that positions with no salaries at all were the most eagerly sought. Essential facilities, such as banks, were all but unknown. Colonial bookkeeping had ranged from sloppy to nonexistent. Standard business practices were widely ignored and, where practiced, were seldom understood or trusted. Among the common people, “a corollary to the hostility to government in general was their lack of confidence in all forms of paper.”

Wood’s ambitious plans to remake Cuba in the American image demanded prompt eradication of corrupt and careless financial habits. Absent businesslike and efficient means of monitoring the distribution of funds, Wood risked throwing away the government’s $20 million annual budget. Proper financial management thus became a precondition for overall success. In McCoy’s view—
and doubtless in Wood's as well—"the loose philanthropic methods of the early days of the American occupation" permitted the dubious practices of the Spanish era to survive. Under Brooke, the occupation government's Department of Finance each month provided lump sums to Cuba's six provinces, each of which in turn distributed funds to individual municipalities based on requests prepared by local officials. These alcaldes, who in McCoy's eyes had all "the independence and faults of town bosses[,] ... did not see the necessity of accounting for their expenditures, nor for making them in accordance with the specific allotments." In short, so long as requests for governmental funds were generated by the provinces and disbursed according to the whim of the alcaldes, the military governor in Havana could neither determine how occupation funds would be spent nor prevent their misuse.13

The controls that McCoy devised corrected this situation by expanding the role of the military governor at the expense of both provincial and local officials. McCoy created eleven fiscal zones, each directly responsible to the Department of Finance in Havana and hence to Wood. The chief of each fiscal zone was charged with transferring funds from the national government to local agencies and jurisdictions, thereby cutting the provinces out of the process altogether. In addition, McCoy stripped the alcaldes of their authority for disbursing revenues provided by the military government. Supplanting the alcaldes were officers of the U.S. Army, appointed as bonded disbursing officers for public activities such as hospitals, school systems, and penal institutions. Under this system, the alcalde received funds to pay his local police force but little else. No longer were lump sums transferred by the Department of Finance to the provinces for distribution to local municipalities. The sums given to disbursing officers were issued as checks for specified projects or activities already approved by Wood, thus reducing the likelihood of funds being diverted to unauthorized uses. And because Wood himself acted as the government's unrestricted approving authority and personally scrutinized the monthly estimates that McCoy assembled from the fiscal zones, the new system assured the military governor for the first time that resources were being used precisely as he intended. As McCoy commented, "With this system it is possible to know the exact purpose for which every cent has been allotted."14

Supported by McCoy's reliable system for managing the military government's financial affairs, Wood proceeded with his plan for remaking Cuba. The highhandedness and arrogance with which the general went about his task stirred controversy in his own time, and historians since have debated his underlying aims and the long-term effects of his tenure. Yet few dispute that Wood succeeded in what he set out to do and that the Cuban people benefited from the immediate fruits of that success. A hostile journalist classified the first American intervention as "a model of fine trusteeship." And the historian Philip Foner, otherwise an unrelenting critic of the American presence in Cuba, admitted that Wood's administration had "many important achievements,
especially in the areas of sanitation, education, and public works.” Under Wood, recounts Foner,

Havana and other cities were modernized; yellow fever was suppressed; the judicial system was overhauled; municipal government reorganized; sanitary campaigns were pushed with vigor; roads were built, harbors dredged, sewers installed, streets paved and telegraph lines strung. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, public education became a reality in Cuba.  

From 1899 to 1902, Cuba became a workshop for American progressivism. Wood and his band of military reformers experimented with techniques that civilian progressives later applied to the United States itself. As measured by the desperately needed improvements made to everyday Cuban life, the experiment was a great success. Vastly improved public services, schools, and administrative efficiency improved the quality of Cuban life. As a result, the American occupation of Cuba acquired a humanitarian reputation unique in the annals of imperialism. Yet Wood’s brand of progressivism was not as benign as the circumstances existing in Cuba permitted it to appear. Unlike many domestic progressives, Wood did not see reform as a vehicle for preserving—or, in Cuba’s case, creating—democracy. Wood cared little about whether Cuban politics were undemocratic or not. What Wood did care about, and could not abide, was that nothing in Cuba worked properly—not the schools, not the hospitals, not the economy, and not the bureaucracy. Finding such chaos intolerable, he set out to provide Cuba with a rational and efficient order. With the local populace too exhausted by war to do anything but acquiesce, Wood enjoyed a remarkably free hand. This situation permitted him to satisfy simultaneously the imperatives of American control, societal efficiency, and the basic needs of the people. The Cuban experience did not show—as Wood’s subsequent assignment to the Philippines would—how the army’s progressives would react if forced to choose among those imperatives.  

From McCoy’s perspective, whether the military government’s policies did or did not conform to the principles of the embryonic progressive movement mattered little. McCoy viewed Wood’s reforms less as a comprehensive plan to determine Cuba’s destiny than as a pragmatic, expedient response to a crisis of monumental proportions. The conditions confronting Americans in Cuba were so awful, he later told Hermann Hagedorn, that “it was no time for a theoretic economy.” Devastated by war and revolution, Cuba required immediate relief effectively administered. This Wood delivered.  

McCoy did recognize that in devising remedies for Cuba and in measuring their effectiveness, the military government drew exclusively on American practices and familiar American standards. Echoing sentiments expressed by his chief, McCoy concluded his financial report for 1900 with assurances that the military government’s objectives were being secured “by the use of American
methods and in conformity with American ideals." In McCoy's eyes, Americanization was not a device for fastening U.S. domination on Cuba but was simply the logical medium for ameliorating the conditions that existed in the aftermath of Spain's departure. Although later generations may find such a belief in national superiority smug and unjustified, men of McCoy's upbringing and experience considered it self-evident. Indeed, the officers who staffed the military government would not have known where else to turn for guidance. What other nation could match the achievement of the United States? To McCoy, American success in Cuba only confirmed such predispositions. 18

At the same time, McCoy sensed that many Cubans disliked their liberators. He knew that many of the original leaders of the Cuban revolution strenuously opposed Wood (they were "jealous"); he heard the charge that American policies "were rapidly wiping out all of the old Spanish customs without regard to the wishes of the people" (though the elimination of diversions such as cockfighting, he claimed, "met with the full approval of all of the educated people"); he recognized that "the great mass of the Cubans don't know or care about the money that has been put into public works, charities, hospitals and schools." Inasmuch as everything had been "shoved down their throats," McCoy "never blamed the Cubans for this apparent lack of appreciation or gratitude." He knew that Cuban pride had been injured "by the way we talk about educating them and cleaning them and their towns." As individuals, thought McCoy, Cubans secretly harbored "that same suspicion that we so often express as to their ability to govern themselves." They resented having the Americans accomplish so swiftly a transformation of Cuba that they believed themselves incapable of accomplishing. Given such a motivation, McCoy refused to take Cuban hostility toward the military government seriously. 19

McCoy remained with Wood until the occupation ended in May 1902. Indeed, his last official duty symbolized the end of American authority in Cuba. From atop the palace in Havana's Plaza des Armes—residence of the military governor since 1898—McCoy watched civilian officials, American troops, and thousands of Cubans assemble on May 20 for ceremonies marking the establishment of the new island republic. At noon, the harbor fortress of Cabana fired a forty-five gun salute, following which McCoy lowered the American colors for what would supposedly be the last time. "It was a hard thing to do," he reported to his mother, "—and for the General to give me the orders too!—pulling down the Stars and Stripes even in this very honorable manner." 20

If ending the occupation—a step Wood considered premature—was more than slightly bittersweet for McCoy, his role in the army's first venture in military government profoundly influenced his life. Service in Cuba reinforced McCoy's belief in the superiority of American methods and values and in their relevance for other peoples. More important, McCoy's Cuban experiences provided an invaluable apprenticeship in civil administration, convincing him, as it did Wood's other disciples, that this was a field in which military men should play a
leading role. As Maj. Hugh L. Scott, Chaffee’s successor as Wood’s chief of staff, concluded, “A military government is the only kind fit to cope with such conditions” as existed in Cuba. McCoy agreed wholeheartedly. As governor, Wood addressed “a great many problems which he was confident the military government could settle, but which a political government could never in the world untangle.”

As a result of his Cuban service, too, McCoy established himself as an intimate member of Wood’s circle, an elite group that continued to expand in size and influence after 1902. Indeed, by the time he boarded the U.S.S. Brooklyn in Havana harbor to accompany Wood back to the United States, McCoy had become the general’s closest professional confidant and virtually a member of his family. His relationship with Wood—the army’s youngest general, a personal friend of Theodore Roosevelt, and a man with connections throughout Washington—all but guaranteed McCoy’s career. More important, through his service at Wood’s side, McCoy matured professionally. If the youthful subaltern spoiling for a fight had not altogether disappeared, he had certainly broadened his appreciation of the purposes that the army might serve even in peacetime. Wood’s imprint on Cuba would fade; his impact on McCoy would endure.