
Juan José Arévalo, Introduction to The Shark and the Sardines, 1961

Juan José Arévalo (1904–1990) was elected president of Guatemala in 1944 in what was considered by many the first fair and democratic election in Guatemalan history. During his term in office (1945–1951), he initiated a moderate agrarian reform that continued under the administration of Jacobo Arbenz, who succeeded him as president in 1951. The Eisenhower administration and U.S. foreign companies with investments in Guatemala, especially the United Fruit Company, became concerned about the course of the agrarian reform. In 1954 the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a coup d’état that overthrew the Arbenz government. Arévalo published The Shark and the Sardines, an allegory about U.S. domination of Latin America, in Spanish in 1956. An English version appeared in 1961. The fable, as Arévalo called his book, echoed a strong anti-imperialist sentiment prevalent throughout the continent against U.S. government meddling in Latin America.

In your hands you hold a controversial book—a book that speaks out against your State Department’s dealings with the peoples of Latin America during the twentieth century. It intends neither insult nor offense to the United States as a nation. The future of your country is identified with the future of contemporary democracy. Neither does this book seek to cast blame on the North American people—who, like us, are victims of an imperialist policy of promoting business, multiplying markets, and hoarding money.

Very different was the ideology of the men who first governed your country. It was as thirteen widely varying former colonies inspired by ideals of individual freedom, collective well-
being, and national sovereignty that the United States came into existence in the world. Protestants, Catholics, and Masons alike, those men of the eighteenth century were moved by an ardent sense of dignity that won for them and for their cause the sympathy and the admiration of the entire world. They recognized worth in all kinds of work, they welcomed to their shores foreigners of every origin, and when their crops and their homes were threatened, they defended their crops and their homes just as they defended the privacy of the individual conscience. They went to church with their heads held high and they founded colleges so that their children might advance among the road to self-improvement.

Moral values served as a motivating force in the days of your independence. Those same values, confirmed by the civilian populace of the young republic, figured among the norms of government. The nation was characterized by its grandeur of spirit and indeed great were the military accomplishments and the thesis of the new law. Amazed, the world applauded.

But as the twentieth century was dawning, the White House adopted a different policy. To North America as a nation were transferred the know-how, sentiments, and appetites of a financial genius named [John D.] Rockefeller. Grandeur of spirit was replaced by greed. The government descended to become a simple entrepreneur for business and protector of illicit commercial profits. From then on, accounting was the science of sciences. The new instrument of persuasion was the gunboat. Now the United States had become different. It was neither a religious state nor a juridical state but rather, a mercantile state—a gigantic mercantile society with all the apparatus of a great world power. The European juridical tradition was abandoned and North American morality was forgotten. The United States thenceforth was to be a Phoenician enterprise, a Carthaginian republic. Washington and Lincoln must have wept in shame in their graves.
The immediate victim was Latin America. To the North American millionaires converted into government, Latin America appeared an easy prey, a “big moneymaker.” The inhabitants of this part of the world came to be looked upon as international *braceros*. The multiple-faceted exploitation was carried out with intelligence, with shrewdness, with the precision of the clockwork, with “scientific” coolness, with harshness, and with great arrogance. From our southern lands, the river of millions began to flow northward, and every year it increased. The United States became great while progress in Latin America was brought to a halt. And when anything or anyone tried to interfere with the bankers or the companies, use was made of the Marines. Panama, 1903. Nicaragua, 1909. Mexico and Haiti, 1914. Santo Domingo, 1916.

Along with the military apparatus, a new system of local “revolutions” was manipulated—financed by the White House or by Wall Street, which were now the same. This procedure continued right up to the international scandal of the assault on Guatemala in 1954, an assault direct by Mr. Foster Dulles, with the okay of Mr. Eisenhower, who was your President at that time. North American friends, this is history, true history, sketched here as briefly as possible.

We Latin Americans, who, more than anybody else, suffered from this change in political philosophy and its consequences, could no longer be friends of the government of the United States. The friendship certainly could be reestablished. But to do so, it would be necessary for the White House to alter its opinion of us, and it would be necessary for its conduct to change. We expect a new political treatment. We do not want to continue down this slope that takes us straight to colonial status, however it may be disguised. Neither do we want to be republics of merchants like the African trading stations of old.
We Latin Americans are struggling to prevent the business mentality from being confused with, or merged into, statesmanship. The North American example has been disastrous to us and has horrified us. We know that a government intimately linked to business and receiving favors from business loses its capacity to strive for the greatest possible happiness for the greatest number of its people. When businessmen become rulers, it is no longer possible to speak of social justice; and even the minimum and superficial “justice” of the common courts is corrupted.

In our resistance to the business mentality, we are still Spanish, stubbornly Spanish. Also, we have not stopped being Catholic, nor have we stopped being romantic, and we cannot conceive of private life without love, nor of public life without chivalry, or of our children’s education without ideals.

If you want to be our fiends, you will have to accept us as we are. Do not attempt to remodel us after your image. Mechanical civilization, material progress, industrial techniques, wealth, comfort, hobbies—all these figure in our programs of work and enjoyment of life. But, for us, the essence of human life does not lie in such things.

These lines, my North American friends, are meant to explain why I wrote the fable of The Shark and the Sardines. This book was written with indignation—indignation wrapped from time to time in the silk of irony. It declares that international treaties are a farce when they are pacted between a “shark” and a “sardine.” It denounces the Pan-American system of diplomacy as an instrument at the service of the shark. It denounces the Pan-American idea of “allegiance to the hemisphere”—a juridical device that will inevitably lead to the establishing of an empire from pole to pole. It denounces the relentless and immense siphoning-off of wealth from south to
It denounces the existence of the terrible syndicate of millionaires, whose interests lie even outside the United States.

It denounces the subordination of the White House to the syndicate. It denounces the conversion of your military into vulgar policemen for the big syndicates. And for the purpose of analysis, it takes up the case of Nicaragua, compelled by the United States to sign (in 1914-1916) a treaty that does against all written and all moral laws.

This book, friends of the North, has been read all over Latin America. Read it now, yourselves, and accept it as a voice of alarm addressed to the great North American people who are still unaware of how many crimes have been committed in their name.

Suggestions for Further Reading


