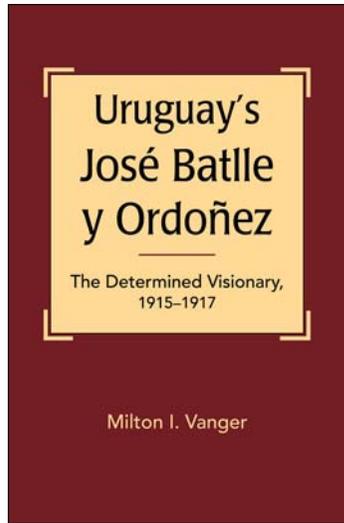


EXCERPTED FROM

Uruguay's
José Batlle y Ordoñez:
The Determined Visionary,
1915–1917

Milton I. Vanger

Copyright © 2010
ISBN: 978-1-58826-694-1 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314

Boulder, CO 80301

USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

<i>List of Tables and Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Viera's Inauguration	9
2 Piedras Blancas	17
3 Constitutional Reform	27
4 Batlle's Reforms	31
5 The Eight-hour Day	41
6 Education	55
7 Rancher Opposition	63
8 Old-age Pensions	71
9 Catholicism in Our Times	77
10 Campaigning	83
11 Enforcing the Eight-hour Day	91
12 Explaining the Colegiado	97
13 Opposing the Colegiado	107
14 The Right to Food	113
15 Vote Colegialist or Stay Home?	119
16 Election Eve	125

17	The Defeat of the Colegiado	135
18	Viera's Halt	143
19	Batlle's Burial	161
20	The Grand Solution	167
21	A New Cabinet	177
22	The Election of 14 January 1917	189
23	Batlle Resurrected	207
24	The Committee of Eight and the New Constitution	221
25	Where Will the New Constitution Take Us?	237
26	Uruguay Wins Diplomatically	249
27	Viera Ends the Halt	255
28	Batlle's "My Conduct in the Reform"	261
	Epilogue	269
	<i>Index</i>	275
	<i>About the Book</i>	295

Introduction

Uruguay's José Batlle y Ordoñez¹ envisioned his country as a democracy governed by a plural executive and implementing advanced social reforms. This was too much for voters to accept. Yet Batlle achieved a good part of what he championed and laid the ground for future reforms. Focusing on the years 1915–1917, that is the theme of this book.

Looking back in 1915 to the beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear that Uruguay had progressed tremendously. The great political question in 1901–1902, when Batlle was campaigning for and narrowly winning the presidency of the country, was whether Uruguayans could stop killing each other in revolutions. In 1915, the great question was whether Uruguay was becoming the most advanced democracy in Latin America or a dictatorship hidden by the window dressing of a plural executive, the *Colegiado*. Batlle was the man around whom the latter question revolved.

When he was first elected president (his term began in 1903), Batlle was seen as a Colorado Party politician who, while calling for elections instead of civil war, lacked any distinctive ideological or economic program. But once in office, he used the government armies, the national budget, and the railroad system to win the War of 1904 against the Colorados' traditional Blanco (Nationalist) enemy, which had its own advantage: some twenty thousand armed, rugged, and able volunteers. The Nationalists' general, Aparicio Saravia, was beloved by his soldiers, but this time luck was against him.

In the late afternoon of the battle of Masoller near the Brazilian border, Saravia rode to his army's advanced positions to encourage his men. Government sharpshooters were taking long shots, and a bullet hit Saravia in the chest. When the news that their *Cabo Viejo* (Old Corporal) was dying reached his volunteers, the army disintegrated.

Batlle, who had directed the war from the capital, Montevideo, telegraphing orders to his commanders, quickly grasped the extent of his victory. He accepted the revolutionaries' surrender, called a legislative election for January 1905, and saw his hand-picked candidates win the majority of seats. It was the first election in thirty years in which the outcome was not predetermined.

Some historians refer to the peace that followed as the Second Foundation of the Uruguayan Republic. Peace encouraged ranchers, who formed the base of the country's economy, to buy breeding stock to make up for their war losses and to buy or rent more land to pasture their livestock. Uruguay's businesses began to invest in foreign companies to construct miles of new railroad lines and to electrify the trolley lines in Montevideo. Economic growth increased government revenues, with a result that was hard to believe: Uruguay had a budget surplus.

Batlle's administrative abilities earned him the respect of the conservative classes: the local and foreign business community and the ranchers. At the same time, his political success made him the *jefe civil* (civilian chief) of the Colorado Party. He was now able to show a side of himself that was unknown before the military victory. He successfully pushed divorce legislation, supported the removal of crucifixes from rooms in public hospitals, achieved the abolition of the death penalty, and even looked into cleaning up the morass of *tierras fiscales*, privately occupied public lands, an issue so politically perilous that previous governments had avoided touching it.

When the government nationalized Montevideo's electric power plant, Batlle justified it in the context of his "interest in the widest diffusion and distribution of all classes of services that are presently considered necessary for the general welfare, comfort, and hygiene."² He intended the power plant to be only the first of a set of state enterprises that would provide low-cost services, simultaneously saving the public money and keeping Uruguayan capital from being shipped abroad as profits by foreign companies operating in the country.

Not surprisingly, there was too little time left in the course of his administration for Batlle to accomplish all that he wanted. The constitution prohibited immediate reelection, so he decided to try a novel approach. He would hand-pick his successor for the 1907 presidential term and then win a second term for himself in 1911.

His choice of his old friend and current minister of the interior, Claudio Williman, was a shrewd one. Williman, a railroad lawyer and former rector of the university (la Universidad de Montevideo),

pleased members of the conservative classes, who were relieved that he would replace the combative Batlle. At the same time, Batlle's sponsorship assured that the young Colorado members who now filled the legislative chambers would support Williman. Williman was easily elected and, in another unusual move, Batlle and his family left for a four-year stay in Europe.

Batlle succeeded in being reelected in 1911. The Colorados called him their hero, the man who had defeated the Nationalists once and for all. The conservatives would have preferred another Williman, but Batlle was better than civil war.

Batlle returned from Europe determined to take advantage of Uruguay's small population (approximately 1,400,000) and relative newness to make it "a small model country."³ He set the tone at the beginning of his administration when the unions, kept under control by Williman, called the first general strike in Montevideo's history. After an evening meeting, a crowd shouting "Viva the strike" and "Viva Batlle" broke through the police lines outside Batlle's house and called on him to come out and speak. He did: "Organize yourselves, unite, and try to achieve the improvement of your economic conditions. You can be sure that the government will never be your enemy, as long as you respect law and order."⁴

Conservatives seethed. The new president had just blessed a general strike organized by the Anarchist-led Labor Federation, which only weeks ago had dedicated itself to achieving "Anarcho-Communism." But Batlle held firm. "The labor element is an important part of the nation," he stated, "and the nation cannot be said to be really well off, as long as the workers have suffered in silence. The day when the worker organizes politically, participates in elections, makes up a considerable part of the legislature, and makes his voice heard on all public questions it will no longer seem so strange that a President speaks to him and treats him with respect."⁵

The achievements of Batlle's second administration dwarfed those of his first. A group of state-owned enterprises ranging from insurance banks to electric-power plants was founded, and a state-owned railway system was planned. The capital of the Bank of the Republic, which issued currency and directly loaned money to the public, was substantially increased. A series of economic-development institutes in ranching, agriculture, industrial chemistry, geological drilling, and fishing were established. Free public *liceos* (secondary and preparatory schools) were founded in every departmental capital, something

that Williman and other conservatives opposed out of fear that an intellectual proletariat would be created. In Montevideo, over the opposition of the University Council, Batlle insisted in establishing what came to be called the Women's University at a time when there were only a handful of Uruguayan professional women. And he proposed that divorce be allowed at the request of either spouse (it was already allowed with the mutual consent of the spouses). This new proposal offended Catholics and solid citizens, who foresaw husbands throwing their wives out into the street. Batlle accepted a compromise, divorce at the request of the wife. He told his closest friend, "It will take us where we want to go, since basically what we want is the liberation of women in marriage."⁶

Batlle also directly attacked the conservative classes, signing contracts to buy merchant ships for the state and setting up a state railroad company to compete with the foreign-owned railroads. His revised eight-hour-workday bill, which if passed into law would have made overtime illegal, not surprisingly was strongly opposed by employers and business associations.

He capped his program in 1913 when he proposed a constitutional reform project that would replace the presidency with a plural executive, the Colegiado. The Colegiado was offered as a way to prevent presidential dictatorship (in a country where every person older than thirteen had lived under a dictator). It would also, Batlle believed, assure continuing reform because the Colorado Party, with its ongoing action program, would control the Colegiado for some years, unlike the present arrangement in which every incoming president was free to reverse or ignore his predecessor's policies.

The Colegiado was more than the already overloaded Uruguayan political system could absorb. Cabinet ministers resigned, and the majority of the Senate, although consisting of men personally chosen by Batlle, announced that it would not bring up for debate the legislation that would enable a Constitutional Convention. Why should little Uruguay become the world's laboratory for exotic experiments in government, economics, and society?

Simultaneously with the political crisis, an unforeseen gold crisis hit Uruguay. Financing businesses became difficult; financing new government projects became impossible. The Bank of the Republic's gold holdings dropped below its charter requirements, and it stopped granting credit. Business was depressed, international trade decreased, government revenues dropped, and the budget surplus became a budget

deficit. Workers' wages kept falling, and unemployment rose. Only ranchers, whose meat, wool, and hide exports were bringing first good, and then astronomical, prices were prospering, but they were holding on to their money in these troubled times.

Batlle resisted economic retrenchment and quickly responded to the political crisis. Not wanting to discredit the idea of the Colegiado, he was not going to use force or trickery to achieve his goal. Instead, he would wait for the composition of the Senate to change.⁷ Meanwhile, he chose a new cabinet from the young and obscure members of the Colorado Party, men who were committed Colegialists. Among them was his heir-apparent, Feliciano Viera, the new minister of the interior and a leader of the generation of 1904 that Batlle had brought to power.

The 1913 legislative election would be crucial. The winning majority would either continue or break through the Senate's blockage of constitutional reform. It would also elect the next president. The Nationalists had been quiet, waiting for Batlle to dig his political grave; now, they would join the Colorado Anticolegialists to finally bury him.

The election came at a bad time for the government. It had not only to confront the split over the Colegiado, but also to defend itself against accusations that its radicalism was responsible for Uruguay's bewilderingly rapid fall from prosperity to economic hard times. Batlle's strategy was to avoid making the election a referendum on the Colegiado or a defense of his economic program, since the dangers of both widening the split within the Colorado Party and giving the conservatives the opportunity to attack Viera as Batlle's lackey were too great. Instead, the campaign would center on the return of the Nationalist menace and the Anticolegialist treason that made it possible.

Government bureaucrats told their subordinates who the "right" candidates were, and at a time when there was no secret ballot, employees who did not vote Colorado would have to accept the consequences. Appealing to the mass electorate, an electric sign in Montevideo's major plaza flashed alternating messages: "To take votes from the Colorado Ticket is to favor the Enemy," and "For the Party, for Batlle and Viera, for Constitutional Reform." Twenty wagons circulated through the city carrying huge signs proclaiming "The Nationalists Are Going To Vote, To Conquer Them All Colorados Must Vote the Party Ticket. VIVA BATLLE." Hundreds of thousands of handbills were distributed.

The newly formed Anticolegialist Colorados had only a rudimentary organization. The Nationalists, however, brought their machine out of storage and filled the streets of Montevideo with speakers. Their leader, Alfredo Vázquez Acevedo, summarized the party platform: to “reduce the action of the State to its just limits, to prevent it from invading the proper sphere of private enterprise.”⁸ He called on the entire nation to vote against Batlle.

Election day, Sunday 30 November 1914, was warm, clear, and peaceful. Even the conservative organ *El Siglo* expressed its surprise: “We must admit that when the moment came, the government did not reach the extremes that its preliminary acts forecast.”

The mainstream of the Colorado Party, the Colegialists, won a landslide victory, gaining 60 percent of the votes cast in the largest voter turnout ever. They would have 68 seats in the Chamber of Deputies as opposed to the Nationalists’ 21. The Anticolegialists did not win a single seat.

Batlle called the results a victory for democracy, constitutional reform, and the Colegiado. Viera’s government was inaugurated on 1 March 1915, which brings us to the period covered in this book.⁹

Notes

1. Batlle did not accent the second “o” in Ordoñez when signing his name or in the newspaper articles he wrote, though it is accented in official documents.

2. *Diario de Sesiones de la H. Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay* CLXXXVII (Montevideo), 387.

3. José Batlle y Ordoñez, in Paris, to Domingo Arena and Pedro Manini Ríos, in Montevideo, 7 February 1908, Batlle Archive in possession of the Batlle Pacheco family, Montevideo.

4. “Otra Vez en Plena Huelga,” *El Siglo*, 23 May 1911.

5. “Entretenimiento,” *El Día*, 5 June 1911.

6. *Diario de Sesiones de la H. Cámara de Senadores de la República Oriental del Uruguay* CII, 430–444.

7. “Platforma,” *La Democracia*, 30 November 1913.

8. *Ibid.*

9. For full accounts and analyses of the period discussed in this chapter, see Milton I. Vanger, *José Batlle y Ordoñez of Uruguay: The Creator of His Times, 1902–1907* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), and *The Model Country: José Batlle y Ordoñez of Uruguay, 1907–1915* (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1980).