For half a century, diplomat and 2010 Citation Award winner Irving Tragen ’45 witnessed—and influenced—history throughout Latin America. By Jon Jefferson
Fifty years before WikiLeaks sent embarrassed diplomats running for cover, U.S. State Department Attaché Irving Tragen ’45 found himself on the international hot seat, and in a big way: Tragen landed in the figurative crosshairs of Communist revolutionary Che Guevara, Fidel Castro’s right-hand man. Guevara had acquired classified comments Tragen had written about government corruption in Venezuela ... and broadcast them by radio throughout Latin America.

Tragen faced more than embarrassment after Guevara took aim at him. He and his wife, Eleanor, received threatening phone calls, and Eleanor—“Ele”—narrowly escaped a kidnapping.

The year was 1961, and Tragen—a specialist in economic development and Latin American labor laws—had come to Caracas a year before as labor attaché. He’d prepared a classified background paper to help the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Venezuela understand the challenges ahead. The paper included “some pretty frank comments” about corruption and graft in Venezuela’s government, Tragen says.

The ambassador tucked the background paper in his briefcase and drove to a meeting at the University of Venezuela. During the meeting, leftist students broke into his car, stole his briefcase, and set fire to the vehicle. The paper made its way from Caracas to Cuba, where anti-American sentiment was running high. “On the night the Alliance for Progress was created,” Tragen recalls, referring to President Kennedy’s initiative to promote cooperation and economic development throughout the Americas, “Che Guevara read that paper on Cuban radio.”

The leak itself was bad enough, but the timing—just as Kennedy’s secretary of state (and Boalt alumnus), Dean Rusk ’40, arrived in Uruguay to launch the initiative—was terrible. Tragen’s blunt comments sparked outrage in Venezuela, including demands that he be banished. Death threats followed.

The threats were hard for Tragen to hear. Literally.

An Unlikely Target

In his youth, the notion that Irv Tragen would one day be at the center of an international incident might have seemed both far-fetched and poignant. He was born in San Francisco, to parents of modest means. At age four, he contracted scarlet fever, which damaged his hearing. By adolescence, he was almost totally deaf.

Hearing aids were cumbersome—“headphones, big batteries, and a microphone that hung down in front of your chest,” he explains, “all tied together by a complex set of wires”—and only marginally effective. But Tragen learned to augment the device with lip-reading, and by the time he’d graduated from high school was confident enough to head to Berkeley, first as an undergraduate, then a law student.

Tragen recalls law school as both “very difficult” and “very stimulating.” At the time, during World War II, the program was compressed into two years. “We had only 13 in our class, if I remember correctly,” he says, “so you had to be ready to be called on every day, and you were called on every day. One day during my first year—in Criminal Law, with the great Captain Kidd [Alexander Marsden Kidd]—I gave a stupid answer, and he pulled his trademark green visor down over his eyes and said, ‘You are a menace to your clients!’ ”

Tragen must not have been too menacing, because in his final year, Dean Edwin Dickinson encouraged him to apply for a “traveling fellowship” to study comparative law in Chile. “He said, ‘Look, you can either go into the back room of a law

SCENE OF A CRIME: Tragen, second from right, examines an illegal drug production site with officials in Peru in 1990.

A MAN OF HIS TIME: Bolivian President René Barrientos Ortuño presents Tragen with an Order of the Condor of the Andes award for exceptional civil or military merit shown by a foreigner, in the 1960s.
their own instruments and began to play. The dance lasted I'd offended them. A few minutes later, they returned with that point, a number of union leaders left, and I worried that dance with the wives of Venezuelan labor-union leaders. At a fateful posting: labor attaché at the U.S. embassy in Venezuela. (USAID). Between 1953 and 1960, he served as a USAID America for the U.S. Agency for International Development. A series of State Department postings took him back to Latin America for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Between 1953 and 1960, he served as a USAID labor officer in El Salvador, Chile, and Peru.

Then, in mid-1960, he earned a prestigious promotion and a fateful posting: labor attaché at the U.S. embassy in Venezuela.

A Near Miss
The early 1960s were turbulent years in the Caribbean. Venezuelan president Rómulo Betancourt’s fierce denunciations of the Dominican Republic’s military dictator, Rafael Trujillo, led Trujillo to support various plots to assassinate the democratically elected Betancourt. On June 24, 1960, Trujillo’s agents set off an incendiary bomb in a parked car just as the president drove past, and Betancourt was seriously injured.

“We arrived in Venezuela and met the president shortly after that,” Tragen says. “His hands had been badly burned in the explosion, and Ele, who came from stern Scottish stock and wasn’t disposed to cry easily, was terribly moved.”

Betancourt’s wounds healed, and Tragen settled into his new post with enthusiasm. “I gave my first party in Venezuela in January 1961,” he reminisces, “on FDR’s birthday. We persuaded Eleanor Roosevelt to send a message to trade-union leaders, which meant a lot to them. We put on a square dance, and I asked the presidents of several U.S. corporations to dance with the wives of Venezuelan labor-union leaders. At that point, a number of union leaders left, and I worried that I’d offended them. A few minutes later, they returned with their own instruments and began to play. The dance lasted for hours; it was a wonderful experience in opening doors between two cultures.”

Tragen’s honeymoon with Venezuela ended six months later, when the pilfered briefing paper and Che Guevara’s broadcast triggered a backlash against the U.S. labor attaché.

“We’d get phone calls at three in the morning. They never threatened me,” he says, his voice still edged with anger. “They threatened Ele.”

The threats proved quite real. “One day, a woman and her daughter who lived in the apartment above us were kidnapped,” he says. “Their white Plymouth was parked directly beside ours. When the kidnappers found out who they’d taken, they released our neighbors on the outskirts of Caracas. It was clear who they were really after.”

Following that near miss, the Tragen’s were advised to lie low for a while. “We spent four or five months scuttling around,” he recalls, “visiting every oil camp in the country, staying outside the capital as much as we could. Things settled down, but the fear was still there; it was always in the back of our minds.”

Tragen’s reputation in Washington remained strong throughout the turmoil. In April of 1962, Kennedy tapped Tragen’s boss, the ambassador, to head the Alliance for Progress—and tapped Tragen to serve as its labor and social advisor. With no small relief, the Tragens returned to the safety and stability of the State Department in Washington, D.C.

But not for long.

From Serfs to Free People
In 1965, Tragen was selected for what he calls “my single most exciting assignment”: heading the USAID program in Bolivia.
At the time—more than a decade after a revolutionary popular uprising—Bolivia remained in the midst of its most radical change since conquistadors plundered its mountains of silver and gold. “When I arrived, the country was still transitioning from medieval society to modernity,” Tragen recalls. “Prior to 1952, if you bought property in Bolivia, you bought an acreage, buildings, animals—and families. The people were indentured, and could leave only with their landlord’s permission. It was like something out of the Ancien Régime.” After the coup, the vast, tenured landholdings were dissolved, and small farmers were allowed to claim the land their families had worked for generations.

In addition to transforming land ownership, the new government—with USAID’s help—began to build roads and bridges “across a topography that defies engineering.” More important than roads and other construction projects, Tragen says, were the steps to create a national education system, a central banking system, building-and-loan institutions, and local agricultural cooperatives. “You can build roads and power projects, but the key to development is helping people take care of themselves.”

Case in point: “One of the first things I did when I got to Bolivia was review their imports and exports,” he says. “I was surprised to find that they imported almost all of the wool for their textile mills. I thought, ‘With 6 million sheep in Bolivia, why on earth are they importing wool?’” Two reasons, it turned out: First, until the 1952 revolution, Bolivia’s native people were prohibited from owning cattle and sheep—only alpacas, llamas, and other indigenous animals. So they had little experience marketing their wool. Second, electric shears—an industry standard by the 1960s—were useless in the unelectrified Altiplano (western Bolivia’s high plain).

Tragen sent out a team of American and Bolivian development specialists with low-tech, manual shears. The team set up a shearing station at an Altiplano market fair and waited. And waited. Eventually, a local woman grew curious and started asking questions. “They explained that they’d pay five pesos for the highest grade wool, four pesos for good wool, and so on,” Tragen recounts. “She thought about it, and then she brought over her flock of 25 sheep.” After all 25 had been sheared, the team offered the woman her money, the equivalent of $75: a whole year’s income. “She panicked,” Tragen says, “and ran and got her husband.” The man was furious, sure his wife had fallen for a scam; the team explained the deal, patiently and repeatedly. “Finally, the husband said, ‘So the money is mine?’ Yes. ‘And the sheep are mine?’ Yes. ‘And all you want is this wool?’ Yes. Well, that did it. The team spent the next three days shearing sheep.” And by the time Tragen left Bolivia, in 1968, the textile mills were no longer importing wool.

“The transition from serfs to free people is a fascinating process,” Tragen reflects. “I found that very, very exciting.”

Waging War on Drugs

Fast-forward to 1982, (it takes a lot of fast-forwarding to cover Tragen’s career), when he retired from the State Department and took a temporary job at the Organization of American States (OAS). “The position was supposed to last six months,” he chuckles. “I was there for 15 years.”

That’s because he ended up taking on a complex new challenge: combating international drug trafficking. As drug use soared in the United States and Europe during the 1970s, trafficking skyrocketed throughout Latin America. A one major supplier was Tragen’s beloved Bolivia, where mountains offer...
ideal growing conditions for coca plants. As rivers of cocaine began to flow from Bolivia, rumors began circulating that drug traffickers had infiltrated the country’s government. Bolivia’s president, Hernán Siles Zuazo, asked OAS to find out if the rumors were true. The investigation, which Tragen headed, found “reasonable grounds for concern,” he says, “which is about the most diplomatic way to say ‘yes.’” Zuazo then asked OAS to set up a program to deal with drug trafficking. OAS’s secretary general asked Tragen to head it.

Between 1984 and 1986, Tragen crafted the framework for a new international organization, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission, composed of the ministers of justice from OAS member nations. Anna Chisman, an OAS staffer enlisted by Tragen, marvels at the speed with which he brought the commission’s members into agreement. “When you can get the attorneys general of the United States and Nicaragua to agree—remember, this was not long after the Sandinistas had overthrown the U.S.-backed government—you’ve really achieved something,” she says. “Irv had worked throughout the region and had amazing contacts in Latin America. He also worked harder than anyone I’ve ever known.”

Drug trafficking proved to be a hydra-headed monster. “It’s a vertically integrated industrial operation,” Tragen explains. “It starts with producing the raw material—coca leaf or opium poppy or cannabis—and then moves to processing that into a drug, trafficking the drug across borders, marketing it within the country where it’s being consumed, and laundering the proceeds.” Each stage in the process offers an opportunity to intervene, but poses complex challenges. It’s one thing to control the chemicals needed to extract cocaine from coca leaves; it’s quite another to detect and stop money laundering in an economy that processes up to 20,000 wire transfers per hour.

One weak link in the war on drug trafficking, Tragen asserts, is the lack of an effective effort to suppress U.S. demand by treating addiction. “It’s never been a priority with our government,” he says, “but Lord knows, as long as there’s a demand, there’s going to be a supply.” He favors pragmatic policies toward drug use and treatment, rather than simplistic moral disapproval and harsh penalties. “We have to get past ideology and make some compromises.”

As Tragen gives a mini-briefing on the complexities of drug trafficking and the challenges of foreign policy, he sounds as if he might be anticipating his next assignment, packing for his next posting. It’s hard to believe the man is nearly 90. “Eighty-nine in May,” he says, sounding a bit surprised himself. “It’s been an interesting career; not exactly ‘Law Suits I Have Seen.’” He doesn’t skip a beat. “I’m still absolutely captivated by the process of development.”

He pauses, but—typically—not for long. “I’ve had a good time, and I had a wonderful wife. Life’s been good.”

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Freelancer Jon Jefferson is a writer and documentary producer. He has written eight books—six crime novels and two nonfiction books—in collaboration with renowned forensic anthropologist William Bass.
MAN OF TASTE: During his time in South America, Irving Tragen developed a taste for an ancient drink of health and friendship called mate, usually served in a small gourd with a filtered straw.