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The Ideal of the Practical: Colombia's Struggle to Form a Technical Elite (LLILAS Latin American Monograph Series)

Frank Safford

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The Ideal of the Practical is a study of efforts by a segment of the upper class in an aristocratic Latin American society to alter cultural values in the society, creating stronger orientations toward the technical and the practical. Frank Safford describes attempts by members of Colombia's nineteenth-century political elite to use technical education as a means of nurturing energetic upper-class entrepreneurs and an industrious working class in a static agrarian economy. In the course of his analysis, Safford sketches the historical development of scientific and technical education and of the engineering profession in Colombia.

The book opens with a description of the economic and social context of early nineteenth-century Colombia. It then discusses some early experiments with manual industrial training between 1820 and 1850. Later chapters deal with the careers of upper-class youths sent abroad for scientific and technical training, the growth of indigenous engineering education, and the crystallization of a Colombian engineering profession. While the book primarily explores the nineteenth century, it also touches on eighteenth-century Spanish Bourbon antecedents and provides an epilogue on the twentieth-century evolution of technical elites in Colombia.

The author focuses on the reasons why the implantation of technical education and technical orientations proved difficult. He examines the interplay between various obstructions: on the one hand, a hierarchical social structure and aristocratic social values and, on the other, obstructions created by fundamental geographic and economic conditions. He concludes that, while Colombian leaders had hoped that technical education and the development of values oriented toward the technical would spearhead economic growth, in fact economic growth proved a prerequisite for the effective implantation of technical orientations and training.

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