

BENEATH THE UNITED STATES

A HISTORY OF U.S. POLICY
TOWARD LATIN AMERICA



LARS SCHOULTZ

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To Karina

Preface

In late 1989 President George Bush traveled to Costa Rica to participate in a Central American summit meeting, which came near the end of the most difficult decade in the history of U.S.–Latin American relations. The United States was standing toe-to-toe with the Panamanian government of Manuel Noriega, openly threatening the military invasion that was to come two months later. In just two weeks, the rebel Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front would launch daring attacks on cities throughout El Salvador, prompting the retaliatory murder of six Jesuits by the Salvadoran military and revealing how little progress had been made in pacifying that country despite a full decade of U.S. effort. Worst of all, Nicaragua's Sandinistas were continuing to thumb their nose at the United States, four years after Mr. Bush's predecessor had warned that he would stop attempting to overthrow them only "if they'd say 'Uncle.'" When the surrender was not forthcoming, President Reagan had gone before a prime-time television audience and declared the Sandinistas an outlaw regime.¹

As Air Force One was carrying President Bush from Washington, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was also flying to the meeting. Arriving in San José dressed in military fatigues and the black-and-red Sandinista bandanna that so annoyed U.S. officials, Mr. Ortega promptly announced that his government might end its cease-fire with the U.S.-supported rebel Contras. That announcement was enough for President Bush, who took advantage of a news conference to call President Ortega "that unwanted animal at a garden party." He also twice referred to the Nicaraguan chief of state as a "little man," giving such obvious emphasis to the term that it prompted a reporter to ask at the very end of the press conference, "Why do you keep calling him a little man?" The President's final words were "Because he is—that's why."²

Today these belittling statements and the policies that triggered them may seem only a reminder of a prior generation's Cold War conflicts, but

they also reflect a historical attitude toward Latin Americans. Eighty years earlier, in 1909, Secretary of State Philander Knox had made similar comments about one of President Ortega's predecessors, José Santos Zelaya, declaring his government "a blot upon the history of Nicaragua," and Knox's assistant secretary had called Zelaya "an unspeakable carrion." These views, in turn, were a continuation of the already established U.S. opinion of Nicaragua, which one mid-nineteenth-century envoy summarized as "small in Extent, its Govt feeble and its population inconsiderable in number, though turbulent & disorderly." And this observation was similar to an even earlier description by the U.S. consul in León, who reported in 1848 that "the revolutions here, are of so terrible a character, that no good is expected from any change of men, as all such changes have proved for the worse, and it is a positive belief, that were it not for the proximity of the civilizing influence of the United States, this country would by degrees *revert* to the aboriginal state in which Alvarado the Spaniard found it."³

This book is an explanation of the logic that underlies these statements. It is not about Nicaragua, nor is it about the other countries that lie beneath the United States, in a region called Latin America. It is about the policies the United States has used to protect its interests in Latin America. It is about the way a powerful nation treats its weaker neighbors.

A realist would explain the U.S.-Latin American relationship with Thucydides' aphorism that "large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must." This is the best way to begin—but only begin—any explanation of U.S. policy, with a frank recognition of the enormous disparities between the United States and Latin America. The United States is the world's commanding power—not omnipotent, perhaps, but significantly more powerful than any rival force that the world will see in our lifetime and, barring a cataclysm, almost infinitely more powerful than any Latin American nation can ever hope to be. This power is deeply rooted in the nation's wealth. The typical U.S. citizen generates a per capita gross national product ten times that of the average Latin American, and this absolute difference in wealth underlies a nearly infinite range of derivative disparities, in everything from mortality measures to fast food franchises.

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of these asymmetries is that the United States continues to spend hundreds of millions of tax dollars each year to alter the behavior of its neighbors, while Latin Americans do not. Today, for example, the U.S. Agency for International Development is pay-

ing to install U.S.-style adversarial criminal procedures in four different Latin American countries, while no Latin American country is attempting to change the procedures used by the U.S. judicial system. Similarly, the government-funded National Endowment for Democracy is prepared to assist any Latin American country to hold a clean election, while no Latin American country has ever offered to help the United States boost its low voter turnout, nor advised the United States on the reform of its campaign financing laws. Today, U.S. law requires the President to report each year on the efforts that Latin American governments are making to stem the supply of narcotics (and to “decertify” those that fail to meet our standards, making them ineligible for aid), while no Latin American government reports on U.S. efforts to reduce the demand for drugs. Even the Cuban challenge is gone, symbolized by the fact that Washington’s archrival can no longer afford to blanket the shortwave bands with Radio Cuba, while the U.S. Information Agency’s Radio Martí continues to provide Cubans with all the news that’s fit to broadcast. And, of course, U.S. armed forces are still found throughout Latin America—at bases in Cuba and Panama, and as mobile training teams in nearly every other country in the region—while no U.S. citizen believes that we have anything useful to learn from the Latin American military.

“Hegemony” is the term social scientists use to capture the essence of these one-way relationships. Depending on their personal preferences about specific programs, U.S. citizens praise Washington’s hegemonic behavior, criticize it, or, like Thucydides, treat it as a fact of life. We do some good things, some bad things, and some things that great powers have always done (and presumably will always do) to their weaker neighbors. The question is *why*. What determines United States policy toward Latin America?

Self-interest would be a realist’s answer. Throughout history, hegemons have sought to protect their interests by controlling the behavior of weaker neighbors. This hegemonic oversight is costly, of course, but the expense of a Marine detachment or an AID mission is usually justified with the common-sense logic that it is better to prevent something unpleasant from happening rather than to reverse it once it has happened. For more than a century the United States has rarely waited to let a problem develop. Instead, it has tried to prevent the emergence of the threat.

Driven by self-interest, this hegemonic oversight has reached unprecedented levels in the late twentieth century. Today it seems unexceptional for

Washington to be nudging and nurturing Latin Americans not simply to reform their economies (something we have long encouraged), but to revamp their judicial systems and reconstitute their democracies. Woodrow Wilson, whom many consider the most patronizing of all U.S. Presidents, would not believe his eyes; he would marvel at the mere fact that the United States has created and maintained not only an Agency for International Development to assist Latin America's economic improvement but also a National Endowment for Democracy to help with the region's political development. President Wilson may have wanted to teach Latin Americans to elect good leaders, but he would never have recommended that U.S. taxpayers pick up the tab for other peoples' economic and political development.

The slowly growing belief that self-interest requires ever-increasing efforts to influence the behavior of a weaker people—"hegemony creep"—is common among great powers, but its full significance in U.S.-Latin American relations was masked until recently by the Cold War imperative of excluding the Soviet Union from the Western Hemisphere. But when the Soviet Union disappeared and U.S. security interests no longer required the same level of dominance, Washington identified new problems—everything from drug trafficking to dictatorship to financial mismanagement—and moved to *increase* its control over Latin America.

Recent U.S. administrations have justified this preventive hegemony with the argument that today's problems are every bit as threatening as yesterday's Soviet adventurism. Reflecting general public opinion, these administrations argue, for example, that illicit drug use underlies a broad array of U.S. social problems, making our schools unsafe and converting our urban neighborhoods into free-fire zones. It is not difficult to see why many U.S. officials believe that it is just as important to prevent drug production as it was to stop communism. Equally threatening, say many, is the repression by authoritarian Latin American governments, which sends refugees streaming toward the United States, where they overwhelm state and local governments. California's 1994 Proposition 187, which denies government services to illegal immigrants, may seem mean-spirited and shortsighted to many of us, but not to the local officials who are struggling to provide legal residents with public education and indigent health care. It is easy to see how these officials (and their constituents) believe that it is as much in their self-interest to put an end to refugee-generating dictatorships as it was to stop communism. Similarly, if Latin American govern-

ments are so incapable of managing their finances that they require bailouts by the U.S. Treasury, it is understandable why U.S. officials insist on Latin America's structural adjustment.

Overall, the dominant post-Cold War opinion in Washington is that revolutions in transportation and communication have facilitated closer ties with Latin America, one aspect of which is the export of Latin Americans' problems. In response, U.S. officials have claimed the right to respond with ever-increasing attempts to control Latin Americans' undesirable behavior. What is consistent over two centuries in Washington's policies toward Latin America is not the behavior of the United States, but the motivation. For nearly two centuries, U.S. policy has invariably intended to serve the interests of the United States—interests variously related to our nation's security, to our domestic politics, or to our economic development. As the challenges to these interests ebb and flow, U.S. policy adjusts to meet them. What remains unchanged are the interests.

Although these three interests are central to any explanation of United States policy toward Latin America, there is more to a full explanation. Underlying these three interests is a pervasive belief that Latin Americans constitute an inferior branch of the human species.

The precise definition of Latin American inferiority has shifted many times over two hundred years, but for the past half-century it has been summarized by the omnibus term "underdeveloped." As we begin the twenty-first century, corruption is the political indicator of underdevelopment, seen particularly in the bribes that Latin America's public officials are said to accept from drug traffickers. A few years ago, the indicators were authoritarianism and human rights violations; a few years before that, the indicator was unreasonable radicalism. Some of these indicators of underdevelopment are vague and unqualified, whereas others—especially the economic indicator of persistent poverty—are more obvious to the eye, but they all underscore what one U.S. envoy reported from Brazil in 1839: "there is a sad defect somewhere either in the institutions of the country, or the temper and habits of the People."⁴

A belief in Latin American inferiority is the essential core of United States policy toward Latin America because it determines the precise steps the United States takes to protect its interests in the region. Since this belief has existed from the beginning, one way to understand today's policy and its underlying assumptions is to return to the eighteenth century and examine how today's hegemonic thinking began to evolve as the logical

corollary of beliefs about the character of Latin Americans. Other beliefs would not have changed U.S. interests, but they would have led to different policies for protecting these interests and, in general, to a different relationship with the neighbors who lie beneath us. These eighteenth-century beliefs set us off on the path that we still follow. Along the way, a hegemonic attitude developed gradually, so slowly that it went unnoticed until, by the end of the nineteenth century, the notion of controlling the behavior of Latin Americans seemed as natural to U.S. officials as it did to Thucydides. Then Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick generation began to institutionalize this control by creating formal organizations to channel the U.S.-Latin American relationship, a process that continued through the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, when a panoply of permanent bureaucracies was created to promote U.S. economic interests and to protect U.S. security. It is true, as a realist would argue, that today's hegemony is the natural product of efforts to protect these interests, but it is also the product of solicitude for neighbors who, we have kept telling ourselves, will probably remain underdeveloped unless we provide them with our assistance.

To understand contemporary United States policy toward Latin America, then, either we can accept Thucydides' rendering of the law of the jungle and let it go at that, or we can sift through the peculiar evolution of the U.S.-Latin American relationship, searching for evidence of a subtle but powerful mindset that has precluded a policy based on mutual respect. There, in the minds of U.S. officials, we will find the explanation of U.S. policy in a process that blends self-interest with what the Victorian British called their White Man's Burden and the French their *mission civilisatrice*, a process by which a superior people help a weaker civilization overcome the pernicious effects of its sad defect.

The sifting process requires us to analyze how U.S. officials process the information that they receive about Latin America. Stripped of nuance, the actual process is fairly simple. For example, when a State Department official begins a meeting with the comment "we have a problem with the government of Peru," in less than a second the other participants instinctively turn to a mental picture of a foreign state that is quite different from the one that would have been evoked if the convening official had said, in contrast, "we have a problem with the government of France."

What exactly is the difference? To begin, Peru is in Latin America, the "other" America; France is in northwestern Europe, the cradle of the domi-

nant North American culture. Peru is poor; France is rich. Peru is weak; France has nuclear weapons. Peru has Incan ruins, which many consider the peak of cultural development in that part of the world; France has ancient ruins, too, but it also has the Louvre. Peru makes pisco; France makes claret. Peru is not so firmly democratic; France is. Peru is a Rio Treaty ally, which, as alliances go, is something of a charade; France is a NATO ally, which is a very serious alliance. In most of our history, Peru hasn't mattered much in international relations; France has mattered a lot. These differences can be listed almost forever, and each policy maker will have a slightly (but only slightly) different list. The list may or may not be accurate; it may or may not be fair. But the point is that such a list exists in the mind of virtually every U.S. official, and that it explains why U.S. policy toward Peru is *fundamentally* unlike U.S. policy toward France, despite the fact that both policies are driven by self-interest.

Today's public opinion polls indicate that the rough outlines of this "Latin American" mind-set are shared by a broad spectrum of the U.S. public. The initiation of new officials into the policy-making environment is largely a process of refining this unpolished collection of beliefs by incorporating additional information about the region and, at the same time, by organizing, weighing, and interpreting this information so that it fits with the pursuit of U.S. interests. The result is a distinctive mental orientation that officials use to interpret the bewildering array of incidents and problems that constitute the raw data of international relations. This is the mind-set that led President Monroe to announce his Doctrine, that pushed President Polk to declare war against Mexico, that inspired President Roosevelt to wield a Big Stick, that induced President Taft to implement Dollar Diplomacy, that encouraged President Wilson to teach the Latin Americans to elect good leaders, that prompted President Kennedy to establish the Agency for International Development, that influenced President Reagan to create the National Endowment for Democracy, and that led President Bush to call Nicaragua's President an unwelcome dog at a garden party.

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Chapter 1 ~

Encountering Latin America

They are lazy, dirty, nasty and in short I can compare them to nothing but a parcel of hogs.

~ John Quincy Adams, age 12

It took a direct order from President Monroe to make Secretary of State John Quincy Adams recognize the newly independent countries of Latin America. In 1820, when Henry Clay had urged recognition, Adams had scoffed at the idea of developing a cooperative relationship with the people of the region, writing in his diary that “there is no community of interests or of principles between North and South America.”¹ But Adams and his generation were acutely aware that the United States and Latin America shared, at a minimum, an interest in evicting Europe from the Western Hemisphere. When the Latin American wars of independence had erupted a decade earlier, this interest had prompted President Madison to treat the rebels with what he called a spirit of “enlarged philanthropy,” meaning that he would permit U.S. merchants to sell them arms. Always less oblique, Congress simply blurted out its “friendly interest” in Latin American independence, and soon Secretary of State James Monroe notified the European powers that the United States had “an interest in the independence of the Spanish provinces.”²

Since it made little sense to suggest that the United States shared no interests with its neighbors, John Quincy Adams’s comment probably reflected the belief, common among his contemporaries, that any relationship with Latin Americans would be difficult, because differing principles governed their behavior. He meant them no insult; he simply was pointing out that Latin Americans were Hispanics, and that his people were Anglos. To Adams and his generation, that made all the difference in the world.

Anglo-America was expanding rapidly at the beginning of the nine-

teenth century, when Adams embarked upon a half century of public service. The United States now numbered sixteen, and their five million citizens were pushing vigorously into land claimed by others. To the south and southwest, they shared a border with the colonies of Spain, one that only moved further west after Spain's transfer of the continent's midsection to France and Napoleon's quick resale to the United States in 1803. The Louisiana Purchase was but the first of several major nineteenth-century land transactions in North America, virtually all of them favorable to the United States, and by mid-century the nation spanned the continent, thirty-one states with over twenty-three million citizens.

Eighteen new nations were created in Latin America during this same half century. In much of the region the bloody struggle for independence was significantly more disruptive than that of the United States, and, once free of colonial control, Latin American republicans were clearly unable to weave effective states from the war-weakened threads of fragmented civil societies. Visitors to these new republics, including an early U.S. chargé in Colombia, were dismayed by the challenge of forging nations out of "twenty millions of people spread over a pathless continent, separated from each other by immense tracts of uninhabited region, without concert, without resources, and totally ignorant of civil government." Many agreed with Bolívar's deathbed lament when, looking back at his life's labor, the Liberator concluded that republican Latin America had reverted to "primeval chaos."³

It was during this half century that officials in Washington began to create the mind-set that continues to influence U.S. policy toward Latin America. Initially it was shaped by an urgent security interest: as the War of 1812 approached, officials in Washington worried that England might take possession of Spanish Florida, an ideal base for harassing U.S. commerce and for launching military attacks.⁴ Since 1808 the British had been fighting alongside the Spanish to oust Napoleon from Iberia in the vicious Peninsular War—the conflict in which Spanish irregulars perfected a new form of combat and, in the process, added the term *guerrilla warfare* to our vocabulary. As the struggle dragged on, the Spanish became increasingly reliant upon British aid, and the English probably could have obtained Florida for the asking. In mid-1810 Secretary of State Robert Smith warned the British to stay out of Florida; then, in September, Congress passed its first formal statement of U.S. policy toward Latin America, the No-Transfer Resolution: "the United States, under the peculiar circumstances of the