

The U.S. and Latin America After 9-11 and Iraq

By Coletta Youngers | June 2003

From Chile to Cuba to Mexico, Latin American countries united behind Washington in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The Organization of American States (OAS) issued a declaration stating, “Individually and collectively, we will deny terrorist groups the capacity to operate in this Hemisphere. This American family stands united.” Yet despite this overwhelming show of solidarity, the Bush administration has largely turned its back on its Latin American allies. Most disturbingly, it is unilaterally waging war against its own Latin American “axis of evil”—the Colombian “narcoterrorists,” Cuba’s Fidel Castro, and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez—with little if no effort to take into account the concerns of Latin American leaders, reach regional accords, or engage the OAS.

Yet another country was added to the “axis of evil,” according to conservative Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL), with the election of Luiz Inacio (“Lula”) da Silva in Brazil.¹ Upon taking office, Lula pledged to eradicate hunger in the region’s largest country, a far greater threat to most Latin Americans than international terrorism, prompting Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to proclaim an “axis of good.”

U.S. policymakers have long considered the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay a hotbed of Arab radicalism, concerns fueled by bombings carried out by Hizbollah in Argentina in 1992 and 1994. The 2001 State Department report on terrorism still refers to the region as a “hub for Hizbollah and HAMAS activities, particularly for logistical and financial purposes,”² concerns echoed again in the 2002 report. Arab populations in Latin America are now under close scrutiny by U.S. intelligence officials, raising serious civil rights concerns. However, alleged terrorist activity in this area of the world pales in comparison to other U.S. global priorities. In short, Latin America is near the bottom of the U.S. anti-terrorist agenda.

The one exception is Colombia. Home to three groups on the U.S. State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations and the third-largest recipient

of U.S. military aid in the world, Colombia remains the centerpiece of U.S. counter-terrorist efforts in the hemisphere. In the post-September 11 worldview of most Washington policymakers, the distinction between terrorists and drug traffickers operating in Colombia and other places has been obliterated. “Terrorism and drugs go together like rats and the bubonic plague,” proclaims U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft. “They thrive in the same conditions, support each other and feed off of each other.”³ The United States has consequently collapsed its anti-drug and counter-terrorism efforts into a single offensive.

U.S. Policy Toward the Region

Across Latin America, a general malaise has set in due to the never-ending and escalating economic crisis, deep-rooted corruption, and the inability of democracy to truly take root. Years of following Washington’s prescribed free-market economic policies have not only failed to pay off, the region has moved backward—poverty has increased, privatizations have led to rampant corruption and often skyrocketing prices for basic services, and inequality is worse than ever. The combination of economic and political instability can be deadly for weak governments, as was so brutally illustrated in the protests in Argentina in December 2001 that brought down the



de la Ruá government. Yet the Bush administration's response to the Argentina crisis is symbolic of its present approach to the region. Like an angry father, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill scolded Argentina and suggested that it get its own house in order, and the rest of the Bush administration largely adopted a similar tone.⁴ Not even the surprise victory of former president Carlos Menem in the first round of voting in presidential elections—or his quick withdrawal weeks later—provoked significant comment from Washington foreign policymakers, almost single-mindedly focused on the occupation of Iraq.

The trend toward disengagement with the Latin American region evident since Sept. 11 has been exacerbated in the wake of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Tensions are likely to increase as well; Latin American leaders across the political spectrum opposed the U.S. administration's actions in

Iraq, for ideological or economic reasons. The economic impact on the already fragile region is likely to be devastating, as already evident in increased gasoline prices.

Moreover, the Bush administration has made clear that it now favors those few neighbors who joined the "coalition of the willing." Because of their prominent roles in the UN National Security Council in opposing immediate military action, Chile and Mexico in particular have borne the wrath of Washington. In explaining the recent delay in moving forward with the free trade agreement with Chile negotiated last year, U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick said that "people are disappointed... We hoped for their support in a time that we felt it was very important."⁵ Mexican President Vicente Fox has also faced growing hostility from hardliners in the Bush administration, which went so far as to cancel this year's festivities to celebrate *Cinco de Mayo*, a prominent Mexican and Mexican American holiday.⁶

The present situation stands in stark contrast to President Bush's stated intentions upon assuming office, when he promised to develop a special relationship with Latin America and with Mexico in particular. Encouraged by Mexican President Vicente Fox and fueled by the desire to capture more of the Hispanic vote at home, the Bush administration began moving in the direction of a radical reform of U.S. immigration policy, which could have significantly reshaped not only U.S.-Mexican relations, but U.S.-Latin American relations more broadly. All of this, however, was derailed by September 11.

U.S. policy toward the region in the wake of September 11 has largely returned to the "rollback" framework adopted by the Reagan administration at the height of the cold war. Latin America is viewed as a region where "terrorist" threats are to be eliminated, particularly in the tumultuous Andean coun-

tries and communist Cuba. As such, the region is viewed not as an opportunity for constructive international engagement, but as a threat.⁷ This strategy was unleashed full-force in the wake of September 11. Speaking of Colombia, Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL), chairman of the House International Relations committee went so far as to warn that "three hours by plane from Miami, we face a potential breeding ground for international terror equaled perhaps only by Afghanistan. The threat to American national interest is both imminent and clear."⁸

Nonetheless, since September 11, very little engagement by high-level U.S. officials—with the occasional exception of Colombia—has occurred.

The Bush administration's approach departs somewhat from that of its predecessor. While the Clinton administration also adopted a get-tough approach to "narco-terrorists" and dramatically increased U.S. military involvement in Colombia, it at least rhetorically limited the mission to counter-narcotics and paid lip service to the Colombian peace process.

More broadly, it placed greater emphasis on multilateral mechanisms and regional consensus-building in approaching conflict situations and issues such as the environment that are not on the Bush administration's radar screen.

Greater continuity is evident in the pursuit of U.S. economic interests, despite the recent setbacks in Chile. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations have pursued free trade agreements to ensure U.S. economic dominance of the hemisphere and to promote U.S. business interests. The Bush administration also views the region as a source of oil and oil profits. In both Mexico and Venezuela, it has encouraged changes in legal and constitutional restrictions on foreign investment in domestic oil production and has sought to increase imports to the United States. Mexico has responded cautiously to such overtures, while Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has repeatedly rebuffed them.⁹

The Venezuela Debacle

Indeed, the Bush administration's first major foreign policy debacle in the region took place in Venezuela as a result of an apparently military-led coup against President Chávez. Several days of business and labor protests in that country culminated in a massive march on April 11, 2002 in which unidentified gunmen killed at least eighteen people. Chávez's foes moved against him later that night, taking Chávez prisoner and announcing his resignation from office. Business leader Pedro Carmona was asked to head the unconstitutional, military-installed government. Carmona's rise to power, however, was short-lived. Within two days, Chávez, who claimed never to have resigned, was back in the presidential palace.

In stark contrast to most Latin American governments, the Bush administration immediately accepted the illegitimate Carmona government, issuing an unusually undiplomatic statement on April 12 that blamed Chávez for his own fall. U.S. involvement in the coup attempt itself is not at all clear; however, it does appear that the administration had decided that Chávez had to go. As the fourth-largest supplier of U.S. crude oil to the United States, Venezuela has

been an obvious target for U.S. hegemonic designs, particularly in light of Chávez's preferred policy of cutting production to keep prices high. Moreover, Chávez had angered many in Washington with his overtures to "rogue" rulers in Iraq, Libya, and particularly Cuba.

Months prior to the coup, a steady stream of Venezuelan opposition leaders made their way to Washington, many with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and right-wing think tanks. They met with a range of U.S. officials who, while maintaining opposition to an outright coup, likely made it clear that they would very much like "Chávez to go away," ideally via a constitutional maneuver.¹⁰ A strong message of support for some sort of action was sent.

The Bush administration's quick embrace of the short-lived Carmona government was criticized across the region, providing "Latin Americans cause to wonder," according to analyst David Corn, "if the United States is continuing its tradition of underhandedly meddling in the affairs of its neighbors to the south."¹¹ It also sent a dangerous message about the weak U.S. commitment to democratic principles. The U.S. stance toward Chávez, as well as interventions in electoral campaigns in Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Brazil in favor of or in opposition to particular candidates, sends the very clear message that Washington supports electoral democracy—as long as its candidate wins.

President Chávez, however, has weathered the political storm to date. He emerged victorious from the two-month work stoppage in December and January, having shown his ability to hang onto power and maintain significant popular support. Divisions within the opposition, on the other hand, were accentuated by its failure to oust the president. Venezuela's future remains volatile, but it is increasingly likely that Chávez will indeed make it to the end of his presidential term.

Castro's Cuba

The impact on the Bush administration of Chávez's relations with Cuba's Fidel Castro cannot be underestimated. The appointment of Otto Reich as President Bush's first Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America was widely interpreted as a payback to the conservative, Miami-based Cuban-American community for its support of Bush in the Florida recount, as well as "pay-forward for their continued support in the 2002 gubernatorial and congressional elections."¹² A Cuban-American and former lobbyist for Bacardi, Reich has strong ties to that community. Despite growing support on Capitol Hill at the time of Bush's inauguration for a reform of U.S. policy toward Cuba, the Bush administration adopted a firm commitment to the U.S. economic embargo and to continued isolation of the Cuban government, with no significant policy change likely in the foreseeable future.

In an explosive speech before the Heritage Foundation on May 6, 2002, John Bolton, under secretary for arms control and international security, went even further, bluntly stating: "The United States believes that Cuba has at least a limited offensive biological warfare research and development effort. Cuba has provided dual-use biotechnology to other rogue states." He also noted that Castro had recently visited Iran, Syria, and Libya, all states designated by Washington as sponsors of terrorism. Administration officials frequently repeat a statement allegedly made by Castro on his visit to Iran that operating together, Iran and Cuba could "bring America to its knees."¹³ Bolton offered no evidence to support his assertions of biological warfare, which were quickly deflated by former President Jimmy Carter's historic May 2002 trip to Cuba. Carter said that he was told by U.S. officials that "there was no

evidence linking Cuba to the export of biological weaponry,"¹⁴ and while in Cuba, he was given complete access to the country's biomedical facilities.

These sorts of accusations take on greater urgency on the island now that the Bush administration has illustrated its willingness to take pre-emptive military action against its perceived enemies. Though Cuba has not yet made it into the "axis of evil," there are certainly those within the administration who would like it to be there. "To Castro," notes scholar William Leogrande, "who has been the object of U.S. efforts at regime change for 44 years, this is ominous."¹⁵

This—combined with the country's growing economic crisis and hence increasing popular discontent—likely explain Castro's harsh actions of late. In March, 75 people—including political dissidents, journalists, and human rights activists—were arrested, essentially charged with treason and given sentences ranging from 6 to 28 years. Then, in April, the Cuban government executed three individuals accused of hijacking a ferry to flee to the United States. The Washington Office on Latin America, the Center for International Policy, and other leading NGOs active in the Cuba debate widely condemned these actions. Ultimately, Castro's recent moves play into the hands of administration hard-liners seeking to further restrict U.S. policy toward Cuba.

The Colombian Quagmire

The U.S. government is seeking to expand its hegemonic reach across the Andean region, driven in part by the political and economic instability of all of the Andean countries and the potential for "spill-over" of the Colombian conflict into bordering countries. Otto Reich, later named special envoy to the Americas, likes to point out that if the so-called narco-guerrillas were to "ever gain control over larger

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parts of Colombian territories, I think there is no doubt that they will take their business, which is narcotics and terrorism, to other countries.”¹⁶ In short, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have become the al Qaeda of Latin America.

As noted, three of the 28 groups listed by the State Department as foreign terrorist organizations are in Colombia: the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the right-wing paramilitary coalition, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC). In 2001, more kidnappings took place in Colombia than any other country in the world. According to the U.S. State Department’s most recent report on global terrorism, between 1980 and 2002, the FARC killed at least ten American citizens and three more remain unaccounted for.¹⁷ The threat to U.S. operatives in Colombia has received widespread press attention since three Americans, civilian contractors, were captured by the FARC last February, after their plane crashed in southern Colombia. Two other crew members, an American and a Colombian, were apparently killed by the rebels. All told, five American civilian contractors have been killed in Colombia in 2003.

Former U.S. ambassador to Colombia Curtis Kamman sums up: “The terrorists who operate in Colombia have not explicitly declared the United States to be their target. But their political and economic objectives are incompatible with our values, and they could ultimately represent a force for evil no less troublesome than al Qaeda or irresponsible forces possessing weapons of mass destruction.”¹⁸

U.S. interest in Colombia began long before September 11. In the name of the war on drugs, the U.S. government provided Colombia with \$1.7 billion as part of “Plan Colombia.” However, in the wake of September 11 and congressional acquiescence to combat terrorism abroad in virtually any form, the administration moved quickly to expand the mission in Colombia to provide direct counterinsurgency assistance and intelligence. It requested for fiscal year (FY) 2003 almost half a billion dollars in aid to Colombia, 70% of which is for the nation’s military and police forces.¹⁹

A central component of the expanded mission would protect U.S. oil interests in Colombia. The administration intends to provide \$98 million for the army to protect the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline, operated by the California-based Occidental Petroleum and carrying oil for export to the United States. While details of the plan are still sketchy, military officials at the embassy confirm that U.S. advisers plan to train three well-equipped 100-man army units “to act as rapid deployment forces” when guerrilla forces attack the pipeline.²⁰ The pipeline, to be protected by what the Bush administration has dubbed the “Critical Infrastructure Brigade,” provides Occidental Petroleum with profits from 35 million barrels of oil a year, for which it pays about 50 cents per barrel in security costs. The cost to the U.S. taxpayer amounts to \$3 a barrel—in short, a rather hefty taxpayer subsidy for Occidental Petroleum.²¹

The U.S. Military Fills Political Vacuum²²

Colombia is not the only country in the region subject to expanding U.S. military might. As the Pentagon and the State Department bicker over who should take the lead for constructing democracy in post-war Iraq, the U.S. military has already become the unofficial yet uncontested force behind U.S. foreign policy much closer to home. The U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)—with well over a \$100 million budget and more staff dedicated to Latin American issues than the Departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, and Agriculture combined—has stepped into the vacuum created by a distracted congress and an otherwise preoccupied administration to impose its Latin America agenda on U.S. and regional policymakers. By distorting the debate on terrorism, SOUTHCOM is encouraging Latin American militaries to take on greater roles in the internal affairs of their own countries.

From Capitol Hill to Miami to Montevideo, SOUTHCOM Commander General James Hill has been sounding the alarm about potential terrorist threats in the hemisphere. According to Hill, “Narcoterrorism is spreading increasingly throughout the region. Narcoterrorist groups are involved in kid-

nappings in Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Paraguay. They smuggle weapons and drugs in Brazil, Suriname, Guyana, Mexico, and Peru, are making inroads in Bolivia, and use the same routes and infrastructure for drugs, arms, illegal aliens, and other illicit activities.”²³

In reality, his alarmist language appears to be a thinly veiled attempt by SOUTHCOM to stay relevant in an age where security threats are largely found outside our hemisphere. By equating crimes like money laundering and human trafficking with terrorism, Hill is trying to open the door for the regions’ militaries to take a more active role in domestic law enforcement. That door is already half open. Unlike in the U.S., in most of the region militaries are not clearly prohibited from domestic police and intelligence work. In his regular visits with Latin American civilian and military officials, Hill even advocates that laws and constitutions be changed to remove already weak restrictions on military participation in law enforcement.

Human rights and other progressive NGOs strongly oppose U.S. efforts to encourage the region’s militaries to take on larger internal roles. The last time the U.S. government did so, military dictatorships cropped up all over the region—and the people of Latin America are still struggling to recover from the horrors of those abusive regimes and to overcome the corruption engendered by governments lacking transparency and accountability. Latin American governments are struggling with many serious problems, including poverty, inequality, corruption, impunity, and human rights abuse. Effective civilian institutions, not the military, should respond to those problems.

A Political Alternative?

The shift in U.S. policy toward Colombia coincided conveniently with changing political winds in Colombia. As the faltering peace process embarked upon by former President Pastrana finally collapsed and FARC violence escalated, Colombians voted overwhelmingly for hard-line candidate Alvaro Uribe,

who promised to wage all-out war against what he calls terrorism by armed groups.

Quietly backed by right-wing paramilitary groups, Uribe, as expected, has not taken significant action against either their attacks on civilian populations perceived to be supporting the guerrillas or the elements of the military that support them. Since taking office in August 2002, he has steadily sought to roll back civil liberties and human rights protections in the name

of his domestic war on terrorism.

Yet in embarking upon a purely military strategy, Uribe risks repeating the failed strategies of the past. Nearly four decades of civil conflict have shown that the war will not be won on the battlefield. Each day that a political settlement is postponed, dozens of Colombians are killed, disappeared, or internally displaced. While there is no quick-fix to the conflict, the two fundamental pillars of any long-term solution are a political accord and socioeconomic development programs that address the underlying causes of violence.

For its part, Washington should take a cold, hard look at the long-term implications of its decision to slide down the slippery slope of direct involvement in Colombia’s brutal civil war. As aptly noted by Republican Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX), “I can’t conceive of us sending tens of thousands of soldiers down there. But we are down there because we are determined to get involved in their civil war, and it could become a little Vietnam.”²⁴

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Washington needs to adopt a dramatically different approach to Latin America, one that turns around the asymmetrical balance of power between the two and incorporates Latin American viewpoints into U.S. foreign policy. Were they to do so, U.S. policymakers would quickly recognize that the greatest threat to hemispheric peace and security is persistent poverty and inequality. Poverty elimination and the provision of economic assistance—in a way that allows countries to determine their own economic and development policies—should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. Perhaps most importantly, the challenge for U.S. policymakers is to move beyond containing and rolling back perceived threats and work instead toward the construction of a common vision of what could be: a hemisphere united around shared prosperity, respect for basic human rights, and citizen participation in democratic government.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Letter to President George Bush by House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, 27 October 2002, in which he refers to Cuba, Brazil and Venezuela as a potential “axis of evil” in the Americas.
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- ³ Nancy Dunne and James Wilson, “Colombian Rebels Indicted,” *The Financial Times*, March 19, 2002.
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- ²¹ Isacson, pp. 12–13.
- ²² WOLA Associate Laurie Freeman contributed significantly to this section.
- ²³ General James T. Hill, Statement Before the House Armed Services Committee,” March 12, 2003, p. 5.
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