

LATIN AMERICA - The Sunset of U.S. Empire Building: The Rise of a New Latin America

Michael Hogan

Thursday 13 April 2006, posted by [Michael Hogan](#)

A century and a half of interventions, costly miscalculations, even outright invasions, did not do much to push Latin America away from its sometimes passive-aggressive, sometimes envious, but always dependent relationship with the United States. It took the generalized failure of neo-liberalism, coupled with four years of U.S. indifference to the region following the events of 9/11 and the unilateral megalomania of pre-emptive war, for Latin Americans to decide it was time to determine their own destiny.

Increased poverty, the failure of the Washington consensus and the IMF, privatization and corporate greed, the marginalization of large groups of people in what Washington touted as democratic reform and free trade led to a gradual rejection of the advice from U.S. economic and political experts pushing the neo-liberal agenda throughout the hemisphere. The perceived hypocrisy of the United States government which, while condemning torture by the Latin American military in the past, exceeded the worst examples of it at Abu Ghraib, the failure to consult allies on a massive preemptive invasion, the callousness of a government which deported Central Americans during one of the worst hurricanes in history and then failed to provide significant humanitarian aid, all contributed to the loss of U.S. moral authority in the region.

It used to be that the more the U.S. blundered, the angrier Latin Americans would become. Now, they are mostly grateful. Global television satellites carry pictures and narratives describing a government they no longer envy, and behaviors they find deplorable. The governmental indifference they see as they view America's own poor in New Orleans slighted by elected officials, the incompetence which is apparent as they view \$300 million in mobile homes abandoned at an Arkansas airport, the intransigence which they observe as they watch American marines dying in what is essentially a civil conflict in an Arab country, the violation of basic human rights which they read of as America citizens have their phones tapped to provide more "national security," has made Latin Americans turn inward in recent years and rely on themselves, and on their neighbors with whom they share common cultural backgrounds and common goals. It has also helped them to avoid the ideological dichotomies and rhetorical traps which are so ubiquitous in U.S. public discourse, and to openly question the sacredness of strong executive democracy, global security, free trade, and privatization, creation of more ownership wealth, while taking a second look at socialism, community action, regional alliances, Bolivarian revolution, public resources, common space, state utilities, and equitable distribution of wealth. They have moved beyond traditional formulations and clichés, and toward a more pragmatic approach to true democracy "of the people, by the people, and for the people," in the proto-socialist language of Abraham Lincoln.

The result has been more autonomous action in recent years: characterized by more self-reliance by Latin American republics, the growth of regional alliances, the use of true democratic instruments such as referendum and recall to change a constitution, unseat presidents who were toadies of the IMF, and to curtail the abuses of state power. It has made political leaders more responsive to the people, resulting in a new recognition of indigenous rights, ignoring IMF guidelines and World Bank suggestions, partial discounting of debts which were bleeding the populace of social services and basic subsidies, and a refusal to privatize water and other resources which properly belong to the citizens themselves, and are their legacy to their children. It can be seen in the almost unanimous condemnation of the war with Iraq by Latin Americans, a general distrust of the hemispheric security alliance proposed by Washington, a

rejection of U.S. corporate theories maximizing profit at the expense of people, most significantly seen with Wal-Mart, which has devastated the landscape of the U.S. and undermined small businesses, but has been rejected by much of Latin America and may force it to close its doors permanently in Argentina because of declining profits.

A SIMPLE CORRECTIVE

What the U.S. government and pundits (both conservative and liberal) characterize as a Leftist movement and a resurgence of Marxism in the region, most Latin Americans view as a simple corrective, much like that implemented during the era of Franklin Roosevelt after the disaster of the Great Depression and the incompetence of the Hoover Administration. What North Americans view as unholy alliances such as those being formed between Venezuela and Cuba, most Latin Americans see as practical solutions to real problems of survival, no less pressing than that of the United States which formed its alliance with Russia in the 1940s to insure the survival of its people. What North Americans see as disorderly and chaotic, for example the labor strikes in Nicaragua, the indigenous blockades of highways in Guatemala, the removal of presidents in Argentina, the constitutional reforms in Venezuela, most Latin Americans see as true democratic processes where the people are finally having a real voice in governance, correcting plutocratic republics which have long been tilted in favor of inherited wealth and privilege, much as our U.S. activist labor organizations operated as a corrective against the abuses of the Carnegies and Vanderbilts in the early part of the 20th century. For too long Latin Americans have been denied their own history while the U.S. forced them to operate as adjuncts to the North American story. Now all that has changed. Latin Americans are writing this new chapter of continental history and they do not want U.S. editors or spellcheckers involved in the process.

EROSION OF NEOLIBERALISM

Throughout Latin America grassroots reactions against globalization policies promoted by the U.S. multinationals and the IMF, have been having their effect. The voices of organized labor, the unrepresented working poor, university students, indigenous people, environmentalists, professors, middle and left political candidates, are finally being heard. The regional press, which used to call any such opposition “global-phobia” and demean the protestors as unorganized and without a clear agenda, has now begun to report more seriously, occasionally even editorializing on their behalf. Moreover, the protests are having concrete results as more and more governments are beginning to see the futility of trying to lead without “the consent of the governed.” Some notable examples:

Bolivia. The election of Evo Morales with his commitment to indigenous rights, his plans to nationalize gas, his alliances with Cuba, and his commitment to building a more inclusive nation.

Venezuela. President Hugo Chávez spearheading regional trade agreements, promoting intercambios (medical training for oil), and facing off against U.S., interference in the region.

Argentina. President Néstor Kirchner forcing international bond holders to accept losses on their investments as part of restructuring the Argentine debt, thus reserving some of the country’s wealth to fund needed social programs; paying off the entire IMF debt funded in part through sale of bonds to Venezuela.

Costa Rica. Candidate Ottón Solís, a vocal opponent of CAFTA, forcing Oscar Arias (who supports the initiative) to a run-off, following the February 12, 2006 elections, despite Arias’ international reputation and his outstanding record of achievement in foreign affairs.

Peru. Ollanta Humala, the presidential candidate who has expressed his support for both Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez, is currently the front-runner in the up-coming April elections.

Mexico. Worker’s party candidate Andrés López Obredor leads both the centrist PRI candidate and the conservative PAN candidate for elections this July.

Uruguay. A progressive party which received popular support for its position against the privatization of water is now working as an elected government for social reform.

Nicaragua. As conditions in that country worsen due to fiscal policies imposed as a result of the Washington consensus, former Sandinista Daniel Ortega and other leftist leaders are becoming more popular and likely to have a major impact on the November elections.

Cuba. Agreements with Venezuela appear to be resolving Cuban energy problems which may lead the island nation to a new era of prosperity. Other regional alliances such as the proposed associate membership in Mercosur, and trade agreements with China make the socialist nation a viable economic and political force in the region.

A BROADER DEMOCRACY

When Abraham Lincoln gave his celebrated Gettysburg Address, the oft-quoted “four score and seven” referred to the American Revolution, and the principal defined in the Declaration of its principles. He observed that the Republic had failed. That was why they were meeting on this “great battlefield” in Pennsylvania to dedicate a massive graveyard with tens of thousands of dead on both sides.

The failure of the first revolution which proclaimed that “all men were created equal” was apparent by the 1860s with 13% of the population enslaved (47% in the South), Lincoln wondered whether “this nation or any other nation so conceived and so dedicated” could endure. Even then, of course, indigenous people were not even in the equation, nor were women. While the Republic was a government “of the people,” that is, ostensibly a democratic republic, it was certainly not for the people, except for white men, nor by the people, except for the landed gentry, merchants, the plutocrats of Washington and their minions. He hoped on that battlefield in 1863 that the country would experience “a new birth of freedom.”

What we are seeing in Latin America is exactly that: a new birth of freedom, a more inclusive democracy. We are also seeing the end of ideology, and a different kind of social enterprise. The new models are certainly not socialism as it was known in the past, with indigenous workers excluded from the process, with bureaucracies and party bosses calling the shots. They seem instead to be genuine attempts at government by the people and for the people, which demand that political leaders, business owners and corporations behave responsibly and in the best interests of the governed, that do not condone privatization of the natural resources of the country, which are concerned with neighboring alliances, that encourage indigenous participation at every level and condemn the cronyism common to U.S. politics where lucrative contracts are awarded to friends and pristine lands are exploited at the behest of Washington lobbyists on the payrolls of coal, gas and oil companies.

THE SANCTITY OF PRIVATE PROPERTY

The U.S. has expressed concerns about investments in the region and has invoked the sanctity of private property which appears to have been violated with workers taking over an abandoned hotel, a private school and a factory in Argentina and running them successfully. It has also raised this issue when indigenous people reclaimed untenanted hectares in Brazil and Bolivia, or forced corporate timber cutters to leave ancestral lands. However, in the case of Argentina, these properties were deserted by absentee landlords, and in the case of Brazil and Bolivia, these ancestral lands were either left fallow or in imminent danger of being denuded and destroyed.

Meanwhile, in the United States, good houses and profitable small businesses are condemned so that Wal-Marts can be built, in clear abuse of the true spirit of eminent domain statutes. In addition, this same company and others like it, having destroyed businesses and put people out of their homes, often abandon their own sites within a few years to avoid paying municipal taxes.

Who is instructing whom on the sanctity of private property? Ownership of property is a right which carries obligations. When property is neglected and becomes an eyesore and a health hazard, it is the right of the people in that neighborhood to take action. When a public forest is being denuded, streams polluted, and fertile lands expropriated by international corporations to grow soybeans for China, it is

certainly the right of indigenous people to protect their heritage. This is democracy and this is what we are seeing in Latin America. In the U.S., Wal-Mart using its economic clout to manipulate the courts into condemning perfectly good homes and businesses is a clear corruption of the system, and clearly undemocratic. The U.S. invocation of the sacredness of property shibboleth is clear hypocrisy.

PEACE MOVEMENT

The demilitarization movement in Costa Rica, spearheaded by Nobel Laureate Oscar Arias, is an example of the winds of change in Latin America. I spoke with Arias in San Jose last October and he said that he envisioned Costa Rica as a regional leader in demilitarization which would set an international example of peace, regional cooperation, social welfare, and environmental efforts. Costa Rica has replaced its armed forces with a national brigade (focused mostly on rescue operations, border and airport security, and disaster relief), has thus reserved millions of dollars for its education budget, and spearheaded international aid efforts and peace initiatives (Arias brokered the treaty in Central America which ended a decade and a half of war). Meanwhile, Costa Rica leads the world in environmental custodianship, while the U.S. Congress debates such measures as whether or not it should ravage its pristine arctic habitats for the last remaining drops of oil.

Mexico's refusal to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, most of Latin America's reluctance to be part of the Security Alliance of the Americas, a distrust of American military intervention, including a century and a half of invasions throughout the Americas, leaves only seven countries out of the thirty-four in Latin America as reluctant supporters of U.S. presence in Iraq, and that support largely based on trade accords, and not ratified by the populace.

Most people in Latin America feel that the Administration's use of 9/11 as the *causa belli* for invasion of Iraq makes as much sense as invading Canada in retaliation for the Oklahoma City bombing. They see the 9/11 attack, like that by the home-grown terrorists in Oklahoma, as one perpetrated by individuals and not by a sovereign State, to which the logical response should have been to investigate, track down the perpetrators and their supporters who, the world knows, happened to be Saudis not Iraqis.

The latest Washington-inspired proposal for the region, an "Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism" seems to most people in Latin America as patently absurd. Central America has real and present problems with public safety in the form of trained-in-the-U.S. Latino gangs which have infested their communities and are a far more real and much more imminent danger than Osama Bin Laden. The U.S. seems to have little to offer in terms of help for the problem of these hemispheric terrorists. People in Venezuela and Brazil are much more concerned with problems of crime and delinquency fostered by inherited social problems, than they are with U.S. threats from the Middle East. To them, the hemispheric security alliance is just another U.S. nationalistic plan which will draw off funds, security personnel and technology from areas where it will be most effective for their own citizenry.

CURRENT U.S. LATIN AMERICAN POLICY

There is no consistent policy for Latin America. Most of it has been neglect in recent years. There has been, of course, promotion of trade agreements beneficial to international corporations and U.S. economic interests, the creation of maquiladoras (which, while destroying the environment and putting female workers at risk, insure low costs to U.S. consumers), and a refusal to end U.S. agricultural subsidies which deprive Latin American farmers of a fair price for their produce. In some cases such as Venezuela and Nicaragua, there has been leverage applied to the electoral processes, in Paraguay an installation of U.S. troops, in Colombia a massive amount of funding to impede drug traffic, which has also hindered the growth of leftist opposition, while at the same time insured the relative immunity of right wing vigilantes. For the rest, mostly ignorance and neglect to such an extent that few Latin Americans take the U.S. seriously, just as no one takes an elephant seriously. One has respect, of course, for its size and power as an entity, but not as an intellectual, cultural or moral force, and certainly not for its leadership abilities.

THE COLOMBIAN EXCEPTION

Despite some justifiable criticism of Plan Colombia (noted above) and the continued presence of right-wing security squads, Colombia has gone from a war-ravaged, drug-infested, insecure country in the 90s to one of the most prosperous and mostly safe regions in Latin America. I spent a month and a half there last year and was impressed by the cosmopolitan excitement of Bogotá which compares favorably with Boston in term of cultural activities, music, museums, documentary film-making, fine universities, and continental cuisine. The young people are stylish, educated, and multilingual. It has a strong middle class and, while it has its poor, there is little evidence of homelessness and beggars which one can see any day in Washington or San Francisco.

Medellín, once considered the “murder capital” of the world, is now one of the most attractive cities in the Americas. It has the feel of an Austrian metropolis surround by pristine farms, lushly wooded hills, and crisp mountain air. It has a well-maintained infrastructure, with clean streets, excellent public transportation, and one of the most prestigious medical universities in the Americas. Medellín is, in fact, so safe that it was the city Secretary of State Rice chose to visit last spring on her visit to the region.

Much of Colombia’s success is due to its president, Alvaro Uribe, whose family was a victim of drug-related violence; he has since been committed to its eradication. But, in fairness, it is more than that. There also has been a genuine effort by the U.S. Department of State to work in a cooperative way with local officials in the country, not only to help contain the violence and eradicate drug cultivation, but also to eliminate corruption in the police and armed forces, and to secure the already-strong educational system. U.S. representatives in the region have also exhibited respect for the culture while engaged in these activities. There have been virtually no negative incidents involving U.S. personnel.

Colombian universities are now attracting new students from all over the world; secondary schools are involved in the Advanced Placement program; the president has implemented a plan to stop the brain-drain of the best and brightest and is also offering financial incentives for the 4,000 or so Colombians with masters and doctorate degrees now living abroad to return to their native country.

While I was there last spring a local newspaper conducted a survey asking whether the readers felt more secure now than a decade ago, whether they trusted the police, and whether the president was doing a good job. Affirmative responses were in the 70th percentile. This fall I went down again to visit a school in Barranquilla and I continue to be impressed by the quality of education, the determination of young people to get ahead, and the enthusiasm of those who attend the (sometimes free) concerts offered by Juanes and Shakira, two Colombians whose international acclaim and wealth have not distracted them from their obligations to their homeland, and who have made significant financial and moral commitments to building peace and aiding Colombian youth. Shakira’s Pies Descalzos (Barefoot) Foundation has given aid to thousands of children displaced by civil wars and violence; Juanes has brought global attention to landmine removal, and has turned paramilitary rifles into guitars to highlight the disarmament process.

I have read (and have myself written) a great deal of criticism of the U.S. in Latin America, most of it justified. However, for those who criticize our cooperative efforts of the past decade with Colombians to work for a safer and more prosperous country, I would say come to Medellín, come to Bogotá. You will see what can be accomplished.

NICARAGUA AND BOLAÑOS

Nicaragua is now experiencing its third month (February, 2006) of strikes by medical workers, and all surgeries and outpatient services have been suspended. President Enrique Bolaños, when accused by hospital workers (most of whom make less than \$300 a month) of being indifferent to the suffering, responded with the same kind of rhetoric which lost two Argentine presidents their tenure. He said that he was simply following “the fiscal policies which had been set down” by previous agreement. He was referring to the neoliberal matrix which has prescribed a diminished role for the state in social and economic affairs, privatization, deregulation and labor “flexibility.” There was simply nothing he could do, the president stated; his hands were tied and there were no funds available. His family, of course, can afford to go to the United States or Canada for treatment, although as the days progress, he might find it more and more difficult. As of last week, the transportation workers have joined doctors and nurses in the

strike, effectively blocking the highways with buses and tractor trailers.

This is the indirect result of the U.S.-sponsored military destruction of the Sandinista Revolution, failure to provide for transition or reconstruction after a decade of war, influencing elections (with a veiled threat of loss of remittances), so that the pro-Washington choice is installed with a neoliberal agenda which dismantled social institutions formerly established by the Sandinistas such as public medical clinics, literacy brigades, child care programs, and subsidized transit. All of this resulting in the effective abandonment of the country to the ravages of poverty, destroyed infrastructure, an education system in shambles, a populace with no safety net, starvation wages for the employed, unemployment for the remainder, while savage gangs operate in the barrios with little or no police protection for their victims. Meanwhile, the rich head for their privately-guarded mansions in the hills, while U.S. and Canadian expatriates buy up coastal properties advertised in *International Living* where they live in gated communities feeling cheated now that they have no access to health care, and frightened out of their wits as they read that the drive to the airport (as of last week with piles of tires burning and buses blocking intersections) is as perilous as that to downtown Kabul.

THE BOLIVARIAN ALTERNATIVE

Just as Abraham Lincoln who invoked the hope of a “new birth of freedom” in the United States, José Martí, hero of Cuban independence, also called for a “second independence” in the Americas, this one from U.S. dominance. Now, President Hugo Chávez seems poised to make that happen. The new “alliance for progress,” popularly known as ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), is a plan for regional alliances and sharing of resources. It has resulted in a Development Bank of the South and a Latin American Development Fund to replace dependence on foreign capital and expand Latin American trade with Europe and Asia. For Venezuela, it has also spearheaded the construction of 600 comprehensive health clinics with Cuban assistance, and sent 30,000 Cuban medical technicians to train cadres of health workers. In Cuba, aspiring Venezuelan doctors and nurses will receive free training at Cuba’s prestigious School of Medical Sciences where 43,000 students from 17 countries (including 71 from the U.S.) are now working to get their medical degrees. In exchange, the Venezuelan government will provide 90,000 gallons of oil a day to energy-deprived Cuba, and invest in Cuban electricity production and oil refining. Meanwhile, energy sector agreements between Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay have been enacted which include PetroCaribe in the entire Caribbean region., In addition, Mercosur, the South American trade block consisting of Argentina Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay (Bolivia, Chile and Peru are associate members), is poised to induct Venezuela as a member. It is also considering Cuba as an associate member. With all this in mind, it is worth point out the, despite U.S. efforts to discredit Cuba in the region and in the international arena, Cuba now has diplomatic relations with 32 of the 34 Latin American nations, the only exceptions being El Salvador and Costa Rica.

THE RISE OF A NEW LATIN AMERICA

Latin America is poised to become more independent, making regional alliances, promoting a more participatory democracy, with more rights for indigenous peoples, more use of referendum and recall by the people to push through social legislation or remove corrupt leaders. Socialism will be regional in nature and look quite different from its historical forms (even that of Cuba’s in the past) and a bit more like Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal in some aspects, a bit like direct democracy in others. Labor unions will merge into companies where labor and management share decision making, or are even form worker-owned companies. There will be more worker rights in terms of on-site health care, on-site day care, and worker-managed retirement investments. Vacant land and abandoned buildings (from failed Wal-Marts to absentee landlords) will continue to be expropriated and made productive.

Government leaders will demand more corporate responsibility from users of the environment or put at risk their legitimacy and tenancy in office. Natural gas, petroleum, water and other national treasures will remain the property of the people and be managed by the State or as cooperatives.

The United States will become less and less influential in the region as countries form local partnerships, and form trade blocks for negotiations with China, the European Union and Southeast Asia. Investment in

education will increase with some of the smaller states developing (much as Ireland has over the past twenty years) into significant economic entities, raising the quality of life for their citizens. As Costa Rica has already done, some will abandon armies and armaments and invest those funds in education and social development. Those states with no natural enemies will also become more important on the international scene by offering advice to other nations wishing to dismantle military institutions whose primary function has been to control a marginalized populace.

Countries which have weapons of mass destruction (U.S., China, North Korea, Great Britain, France, Germany, India, and Pakistan) will find the burdens of "defense" expensive, redundant and superfluous as the year goes on. The real threat to the social order and the average person's security on the planet will come from those nations with the most marginalized people and, while most of those threats will be internal (gang violence, crime) some will be external (international terrorism). Nevertheless, experience will be convincing from the Latin American examples that these problems will be far better handled by trained police forces and by international security arrangements than by occupying armies, missile strikes and bombing of civilians.

Latin America will continue to be a world leader in literature, music, film-making, architecture, sculpture and painting. The region will produce new works of political and social thought, explore new dimensions in philosophy and re-write the history of the hemisphere. It will become one of the most important locations for studies in medicine, pure and applied science, engineering, and-most importantly-in the humanities. While the U.S. may invest, as President Bush recently suggested in his State of the Union address, in "more advanced science and math" initiatives," Latin America will balance the teaching of the sciences with investments in the humanities. Time and time again local leaders and the independent press in Latin America have cited the need of citizens to think critically, to analyze their societies, to develop an appreciation of their rich cultures, and to help create a better world. They know that a society composed only of scientists, mathematicians and engineers will not give them that. A truly educated populace is one that can take its leaders to task when they offer absurdities, can form arguments to disprove injustice, and can instill values and respect in its children for many different cultures. Such a society would be multicultural and multilingual, it would value humanity over property, and culture over development. In the words of the poet Jaime Sabines, *Otros saben las palabras del canto, nosotros cantamos*. "Others know the words of the song, but we sing." Throughout Latin America, those songs are being heard.