

US - A Cure for Historical Amnesia: How Latinos Can Remind Us Who We Really Are (by Michael Hogan)

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"The past is not dead; the past is not even the past."

(William Faulkner)

Based on flimsy intelligence, which was then cynically manipulated to prove just cause for a preemptive war, the United States attacked in force. Its superior armaments overwhelmed the enemy. The American press jubilantly supported the invasion and subsequent occupation, praising the Americans as liberators. Though the U.S. suffered losses, they were minimal compared to those sustained by the enemy and by the civilian population. However, as the months passed, the occupation began to seem interminable, and the indigenous government, set up with support of the occupying forces, appeared unreliable and ineffective. It was suggested by some generals and congressional observers that the country appeared "unfit for democracy." Sound familiar? No, it is not Iraq in 2006; it was Cuba in 1898.

Remember the Maine!

On February 15, 1898, the battleship Maine exploded in Havana Bay, killing 260 U.S. sailors and marines. Intelligence sources, largely at the service of William Randolph Hearst, supplied the government with evidence that a mine had been placed in the hold of the ship by agents of the Spanish government. A sketch showing the location of the device and the wires that linked it to the ship's engine room was also provided. On April 25th, President McKinley asked Congress to declare war against Spain for this terrorist act.

Six weeks later, a report to Congress concluded that there was no Spanish involvement. In fact, it was even suggested (and later proven by a U.S. admiral) that there was no explosive device at all. The explosion was caused by the spontaneous combustion of the ship's coal bins, a relatively common problem in those days.

Facts then, as now, had little relevance to the Administration. The war had begun and would be seen through to its conclusion. It gave opportunities to young Americans to be heroes in a war which was relatively easy to win against an outgunned army and a negligible navy. American torture of prisoners and other abuses were excused by previous Spanish atrocities. Historical references to the Spanish Inquisition and the decadent but still dangerous Roman Catholic religion were rampant in the U.S. press.

Intolerance and jingoism were on the loose, and repressive immigration laws and racial invective were as common in the streets as they were in public discourse. Nations who criticized the U.S. were accused of being anti-American, as were domestic critics such as philosopher William James, who cautioned his fellow countrymen to be more thoughtful. He had his work cut out for him. U.S. books and tracts, many published by religious organizations, painted the Spanish race as lawless, sneaky, lazy, venal and treacherous. The Roman Catholic religion was seen not only as inimical to democracy, but also as the antithesis of the spirit of Protestant free enterprise.

But, if the Spanish were unfit to rule, it did not mean that the local population, mestizos and Indians, were any more suited to the task. Even less capable of self-government without the heavy hand of U.S. occupiers, they became the beneficiaries of a century of U.S. advisors, colonial surrogates, businessmen, bankers and managers, who settled in the country, micro-managed its productive resources, and

influenced elections so that the United States would always have preferential trade agreements, cheap natural resources to import, and a controlled little colony where wealthy tourists could gamble and have cheap sex. Best of all, the U.S. could install a permanent military base at Guantanamo Bay where it would control the Caribbean.

One of the heroes of the “splendid little war” with Spain was Teddy Roosevelt, who persuaded his friends in the Administration (where he was Undersecretary of the Navy) to give him a lieutenant colonel’s commission in the cavalry. He then gathered together an all-volunteer regiment which he called the “Rough Riders,” mostly veterans of the Indian wars. His subsequent “cavalry charge up San Juan Hill” became part of American legend and is still in every U.S. history textbook in public schools. In fact, there was no mounted charge up San Juan Hill. The cavalry assault, such as it was, took place at a smaller preliminary embankment called Kettle Hill, after which the riders dismounted and met up with several other regiments and artillery which overwhelmed the Spanish with their superior numbers and armament. Indeed, not only was the battle insignificant in terms of personal risk and bravery but, according to Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage* and a reporter at the battle, several of the Rough Riders panicked during the fracas.

Nevertheless, the heroic lieutenant colonel went on to become president of the United States, and commenced a plan for regional imperialism which would be unprecedented in the annals of recorded history. He would also wage war without benefit of Congressional approval, and his “legal” justification for this dramatic incrementation of executive power was what is now known as “the Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine.

The Monroe Doctrine stated essentially that any foreign power interfering in the affairs of any Latin American or Caribbean republic would be considered as aggressors against the United States which could then, without further ado, enter that country and eliminate the interfering parties. The Roosevelt Corollary expanded the writ even further. Citing the lack of leadership and inexperience with democratic principles among Latin American governments, Roosevelt proposed that the United States, when it perceived weakness or instability in a Latin American or Caribbean republic, could enter that country to resolve the problem, including eliminating the existing government and replacing it with another more suitable! Nor, was this any empty threat. For, depending on whose statistics you include, the United States invaded or otherwise forcibly interfered in Latin American countries over 80 times in the past 150 years (U.S. Department of State records) or more than 120 times (according to Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez). The historical truth is closer to the Chavez estimate, since the State Department does not count clandestine interference, or invasions through the instrumentality of others (such as the Bay of Pigs, using exiled Cubans acting as the invading force).

Let’s Make a New Country!

Once Roosevelt became president he also resurrected the idea of an intercontinental canal. The logical place was the Isthmus of Nicaragua. However, volcanic activity in that country scared off investors. The Isthmus of Panama in the Republic of Colombia was more suitable. Some of the initial digging had already been done by a French company which later abandoned the project. The only problem was that the Colombian government was not interested in having the U.S. military establish a base in its territory, displacing residents, and engaging in a massive dig without a number of reassurances and agreements which Roosevelt was reluctant to give. So he colluded with a French undercover agent in Panama City by the name of Buneau-Varilla to organize a rebel force with the intent to secede from Colombia.

When the rebel force attacked the municipal buildings at Colon and Panama City, Roosevelt had a fleet of ten gunships standing offshore ready to fire on civilian populations and destroy their cities unless the Colombian officials surrendered. They quickly capitulated. Ninety minutes later, the President recognized the rebels as the legitimate government of the new “Republic of Panama.” “I took the Canal Zone and let Congress debate,” Roosevelt quipped, when he invited the French agent to a Washington hotel to draft the Panamanian constitution. The agent’s wife, meanwhile, designed and sewed the Panamanian flag at their new home in Highland Falls, N.Y.

Latin America now had a new republic, thanks to the United States. Of course, the people of Colombia were not consulted, and the “democratic institutions and values” of which the United States was so proud of at home and ostensibly sought to promote abroad were a bit bruised.

And those preemptive invasions keep coming!

In the Dominican Republic, when that country was on the edge of bankruptcy and unable to pay foreign loans, Roosevelt sent the Marines and U.S. customs agents to Santo Domingo to take over the country's finances. With the Great White Fleet firmly in place in the Caribbean, the President wasted no time in enforcing his famous Corollary. Military interventions in Nicaragua and Honduras followed quickly, as the Marines moved in to protect U.S. mining and fruit companies. President Wilson would follow suit in his presidency with interventions in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and the Philippines. The policy of armed intervention would continue in El Salvador, where under Hoover, the U.S. founded a military academy which spawned a brace of dictators and one of the most brutal and repressive militaries in the hemisphere.

When a reporter at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, N.Y., noted Anastasio Somoza, the dictator of Nicaragua in attendance, and observed that he was a brutal leader, known for torture and even murder of the opposition, Franklin Roosevelt replied, “Yes, he is a son of a bitch. But he's our son of a bitch. The new Roosevelt administration, concerned with economic recovery and the war with Germany and Japan, was willing to tolerate many sons of bitches as “allies,” regardless of what happened to the citizenry of these countries south of the border.

Eisenhower presided over the forced removal of the first democratic regime in Guatemala because it appeared too populist to suit the CIA. Later, Nixon gave his personal support to dictators in Nicaragua and El Salvador and to a brutal military regime in Guatemala known for the murders of tens of thousands of indigenous people. When his motorcade was stoned by students during his visit to Latin America, the folks back home were stunned. The public had little or no idea of how our policies in Latin America had destroyed lives, toppled legitimate governments, and made the few young people not starving to death, cynical and distrustful of Washington.

Few presidents would surpass Ronald Reagan, however, who sponsored invasions of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, illegally diverted funds to finance reactionary forces, created a massive propaganda scheme to paint leftist rebels as pawns of the Soviets, ignored the murders of Catholic priests and nuns by government forces, and violated U.N. sanctions by mining Nicaraguan harbors and parklands for which the U.S. was condemned by the World Court. Even today, Nicaraguan children can be found missing an arm or a leg from landmines we left behind.

The problem is those Mexicans!

Today, U.S. intervention continues in Iraq at the cost of billions of dollars and thousands of lives. But the Congress and American citizens are diverted from this legitimate concern by the likes of rabble rousers such as Lou Dobbs and Bill O'Reilly, the moral equivalents of “yellow journalist” William Randolph Hearst.

One would think, by listening to them, that the terrorists responsible for 9/11 were Mexicans who crossed our southern borders. They are spoken of as “illegal aliens” rather than undocumented workers, these people whose land was conquered and then confiscated in, according to Ulysses S. Grant, the “most unjust war ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker one.” One half of Mexican territory passed to the United States as a result of the war with Mexico in 1846-48. It was one of the largest territorial conquests of any war in history adding one third to the land mass of the U.S. Yet it is the least known, the least discussed of any American wars, and it appears only in a few sentences under “Western Expansion” in most U.S. history texts. It raised the U.S. to First World status, gave it the ports of San Francisco, San Diego and Los Angeles, provided a western land route across the country, millions of acres of arable land, and invaluable deposits of gold and silver. Meanwhile, it deprived Mexico of half of its territory and reduced its citizens to Third World status.

Now in the 21st century, victims of economic exploitation and unfair competition, their land taken over by banks because their farmers are unable to compete with U.S. agricultural subsidies, their jobs lost due to unfair competition by U.S. conglomerates such as Wal-Mart which have forced small businesses into bankruptcy, their rivers polluted and their lands rendered arid due to environmental disasters caused by U.S. maquiladoras, they are victims of policies which have made Latin America the “dirty backyard” of the U.S. Now, when these “Americans” try to return to their ancestral lands in California, New Mexico and Arizona, they are treated like criminals. No mention is made of the hundred of thousands of Eastern Europeans, Russians, Irish, Poles, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Canadians, Australians, Iranians, Saudis, Indians and Pakistanis who overstay their visas and are literally the “illegal aliens” in the country. Nor is mention made of the hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, El Salvadoran and Honduran refugees, the children of the victims of our invasions and support of brutal repressions in the 1980s, who “pass as Mexicans” and enter the United States.

More Mexicans have fought and died in Iraq than any other nationality per capita.

The history of the United States’ wars of intervention is an area in which the U.S. public is essentially illiterate. It is why its citizens are so easily distracted at this crucial time, and so easily led into a public discourse unworthy of them. What is even sadder is that the largest single contingent of Hispanics currently fighting in Iraq is made of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. According to journalist Jim Ross, there were 110,000 of them fighting in February last year.

Called “green-card troops” and by some the “poverty draft,” they were all actively recruited by the U.S. Army.

Between 31,000 and 37,000 of the 130,000 Hispanic troops currently in Iraq are non-citizens of the United States. While Latinos make up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 17.5 percent of the front line forces. Of the first 1,000 combat deaths in Iraq, over 120 were Latino and 70 of them were Mexicans. (Source: *New Internationalist*. May, 2005. p. 8).

The large number of non-citizen Mexican troops, brothers-in-arms with the almost 100,000 Mexican-Americans citizens in the Army, is the result of an initiative signed by President Bush in January 2002, which gives them a fast track to citizenship. This is coupled with the strong belief in the Mexican community of paying back to the country, and protecting the homeland, however misplaced that belief might be perceived by others in the case of Iraq.

Most people in Mexico and elsewhere in the Americas consider the term “American” descriptive of the hemisphere, not something exclusive to the United States. Christopher Columbus discovered America in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic, Central America) after all, not in Washington, D.C.

“I look forward to the day, Octavio Paz once wrote, “when the United States will see itself as part of America, not all of it.” Todos somos americanos, we are all Americans, including our oft-invaded, now-maligned Latin Americans whose sons and daughters fight our dirty wars abroad, while their parents receive not honor, but public abuse, at home. This might be a good time to remember our true past and all the people who share in it. President Bush remembers: his governorship and long-time residency in Texas (formerly an integral part of the Republic of Mexico) long ago convinced him. It is time for the conservative critics in his own party to open their history books and replace negative sound bites with thoughtful support, and for the Democrats to replace partisan showmanship with true leadership, and for both sides to join him in his efforts to insure a truly “American” solution that is fair and just, that takes into consideration our complex history in this hemisphere, and is one that all our children can live with.