

Dark Armies, Secret Bases, and Rummy

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It would be easy to make fun of President Bush's recent fiasco at the 4th Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina. His grand plan for a free trade zone reaching from the Artic Circle to Tierra del Fuego was soundly rejected by nations fed up with the economic and social chaos wrought by neoliberalism. At a press conference, South American journalists asked him rude questions about Karl Rove. And the President ended the whole debacle by uttering what may be the most trenchant observation the man has ever made on Latin America: "Wow! Brazil is big!"

But there is nothing amusing about an enormous U.S. base less than 120 miles from the Bolivian border, or the explosive growth of U.S.-financed mercenary armies that are doing everything from training the military in Paraguay and Ecuador to calling in air attacks against guerillas in Colombia. Indeed, it is feeling a little like the run up to the '60s and '70s, when Washington-sponsored military dictatorships dominated most of the continent, and dark armies ruled the night.

U.S. Special Forces began arriving this past summer at Paraguay's Mariscal Estigarribia air base, a sprawling complex built in 1982 during the reign of dictator Alfredo Stroessner. Argentinean journalists who got a peek at the place say the airfield can handle B-52 bombers and Galaxy C-5 cargo planes. It also has a huge radar system, vast hangars, and can house up to 16,000 troops. The air base is larger than the international airport at the capital city, Asuncion .

Some 500 special forces arrived July 1 for a three-month counterterrorism training exercise, code named Operation Commando Force 6.

Paraguayan denials that Mariscal Estigarribia is now a U.S. base have met with considerable skepticism by Brazil and Argentina . There is a disturbing resemblance between U.S. denials about Mariscal Estigarribia, and similar disclaimers made by the Pentagon about Eloy Alfaro airbase in Manta , Ecuador . The United States claimed the Manta base was a "dirt strip" used for weather surveillance. When local journalists revealed its size, however, the United States admitted the base harbored thousands of mercenaries and hundreds of U.S. troops, and Washington had signed a 10-year basing agreement with Ecuador .

The Eloy Alfaro base is used to rotate U.S. troops in and out of Columbia, and to house an immense network of private corporations who do most of the military's dirty work in Columbia. According to the Miami Herald , U.S. mercenaries armed with M-16s have gotten into fire fights with guerrillas in southern Columbia, and American civilians working for Air Scan International of Florida called in air strikes that killed 19 civilians and wounded 25 others in the town of Santo Domingo.

The base is crawling with U.S. civilians—many of them retired military—working for Military Professional Resources Inc., Virginia Electronics, DynCorp, Lockheed Martin (the world's largest arms maker), Northrop Grumman, TRW, and dozens of others.

It was U.S. intelligence agents working out of Manta who fingered Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia leader Ricardo Palmera last year, and several leaders of the U.S.-supported coup against Haitian President Bertram Aristide spent several months there before launching the 2004 coup that exiled Aristide to South Africa.

"Privatizing" war is not only the logical extension of the Bush administration's mania for contracting everything out to the private sector; it also shields the White House's activities from the U.S. Congress. "My complaint about the use of private contractors," says U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), "is their ability to fly under the radar to avoid accountability."

The role that Manta is playing in the northern part of the continent is what so worries countries in the southern cone about Mariscal Estigarribia. "Once the United States arrives," Argentinean Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Perez commented about the Paraguay base, "it takes a long time to leave."

Life at the Triple Frontier The Bush administration has made the "Triple Frontier Region" where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet into the South American equivalent of Iraq's Sunni Triangle.

According to William Pope, U.S. State Department Counterterrorist Coordinator, the United States has evidence that 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed spent several months in the area in 1995. The U.S. military also says it seized documents in Afghanistan with pictures of Paraguay and letters from Arabs living in Ciudad del Este, a city of some 150,000 people in the tri-border region.

The Defense Department has not revealed what the letters contained, and claims that the area is a hotbed of Middle East terrorism have been widely debunked. The U.S. State Department's analysis of the region—"Patterns of Terrorism"—found no evidence for the charge, and an International Monetary Fund (IMF) study found the area awash with money smuggling, but not terrorism.

It is the base's proximity to Bolivia that causes the most concern, particularly given the Bush administration's charges that Cuba and Venezuela are stirring up trouble in that Andean nation.

Bolivia has seen a series of political upheavals, starting with a revolt against the privatization of water supplies by the U.S. Bechtel Corporation and the French utility giant, Suez de Lyonnaise des Eaux. The water uprising was sparked off when Suez announced it would charge between \$335 and \$445 to connect a private home to the water supply. Bolivia's yearly per capita gross domestic product is \$915.

The water revolt, which spread to IMF enforced taxes and the privatization of gas and oil reserves, forced three presidents to resign. The country is increasingly polarized between its majority Indian population and an elite minority that has dominated the nation for hundreds of years. Six out of 10 people live below the poverty line, a statistic that rises to nine in 10 in rural areas.

Bolivia in Focus For the Bush administration, however, Bolivia is all about subversion, not poverty and powerlessness.

When U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Paraguay this past August, he told reporters that, "There certainly is evidence that both Cuba and Venezuela have been involved in the situation in Bolivia in unhelpful ways."

A Rumsfeld aide told the press that Cuba was involved in the unrest, a charge that even one of Bolivia's ousted presidents, Carlos Mesa, denies.

A major focus of the unrest in Bolivia is who controls its vast natural gas deposits, the second largest in the Western Hemisphere. Under pressure from the United States and the IMF, Bolivia sold off its oil and gas to Enron and Shell in 1995 for \$263.5 million, less than 1% of what the deposits are worth.

The Movement Toward Socialism's presidential candidate Evo Morales, a Quechuan Indian and trade union leader who is running first in the polls, wants to renationalize the deposits. Polls indicate that 75% of Bolivians agree with him.

Failed States and Intervention But the present political crisis over upcoming elections Dec. 18, and disagreements on how to redistribute seats in the legislature, has the United States muttering dark threats about "failed states."

U.S. General Bantz J. Craddock, commander of Southern Command, told the House Armed Services Committee: "In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, distrust and loss of faith in failed institutions fuel the emergence of anti-U.S., anti-globalization, and anti-free trade demagogues."

Bolivia has been placed on the National Intelligence Council's list of 25 countries where the United States will consider intervening in case of "instability."

This is scary talk for Latin American countries. Would the United States invade Bolivia? Given the present state of its military, unlikely.

Would the United States try to destabilize Bolivia's economy while training people how to use military force to insure Enron, Shell, British Gas, Total, Repsol, and the United States continues to get Bolivian gas for pennies on the dollar? Quite likely.

And would the White House like to use such a coup as a way to send a message to other countries? You bet. President Bush may be clueless on geography, but he is not bad at overthrowing governments and killing people.

Will it be as easy as it was in the old days when the CIA could bribe truckers to paralyze Chile and set the stage for a coup? Nothing is easy in Latin America anymore.

The United States can bluster about a trade war, but the playing field is a little more level these days. The Mercosur Group of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay embraces 250 million people, generates \$1 trillion in goods, and is the third largest trade organization on the planet. If the American market tightens, the Chinese are more than willing to pick up the slack.

A meeting last month of the Ibero-American heads of state turned downright feisty. The

assembled nations demanded an end to the “blockade” of Cuba . The word “blockade” is very different than the word “embargo,” the term that was always used in the past. A “blockade” is a violation of international law.

The meeting also demanded that the United States extradite Luis Posada to Venezuela for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 76 people.

If the United States tries something in Bolivia (or Venezuela), it will find that the old days when proxy armies and economic destabilization could bring down governments are gone, replaced by countries and people who no longer curtsy to the colossus from the north.

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