

# Dirty Business, Dirty Wars: U.S.-Latin American Relations in the 21st Century

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Much is being made across the political spectrum in the United States about Washington's waning influence in Latin America. The region has seen an emergence of left and center-left presidents voted into office, many as a result of budding social movements growing democracy from the grassroots. Some pundits and analysts are suggesting that this phenomenon is occurring because of the Bush Administration's perceived neglect of the region. Rather, what is happening is blowback from Washington's continued meddling in the economic and political affairs of an area arrogantly referred to as the United States' "backyard." Latin America's growing unity in rejecting the Washington Consensus remains fragile in the face of U.S. opposition. Washington has been quietly using the war on drugs, the war on terrorism, and a neo-cold war ideology to institutionalize a militarism in the region that risks returning us to the not so far off days of "dirty wars."

## Breaking the Chains

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's election in 1998 sparked the beginning of the leftward electoral paradigm shift in the hemisphere. After he orchestrated a failed coup attempt in 1992, he was elected six years later based on a campaign that promised to lift up the impoverished nation's poor majority through economic policies that ran counter to the free market fundamentalism and crony capitalism pursued by the country's oligarchs, with the aid of Washington and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Chavez also began to challenge the idea of U.S. hegemony in the region by advocating a united Latin America based on the ideas of one of his intellectual mentors, Simón Bolívar, the 19th century revolutionary instrumental in defeating Spain's control of the region. Chavez, who also claims to be influenced by the teachings of Karl Marx and Jesus Christ, has championed what he calls a "Socialism of the 21st Century." A fierce and outspoken critic of neoliberalism, Chavez has said "I am convinced that a path to a new, better and possible world is socialism, not capitalism," words that have been scarce in the region's capitals with the exception of Cuba.

Since Chavez's ascent to power, we have seen presidents elected in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay which translates into a majority of countries in the region advocating center-left and left-wing political programs (while Mexico and Peru missed joining this new Latin American consensus by narrow, if not fraudulent, election outcomes).

While it is true that, despite these developments, socialism is a long way off from taking hold in the region, the rejection of Washington's Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)

back in 2003, long before the left had firmly taken hold in the hemisphere, marked the beginning of an outright challenge to free market orthodoxy, U.S. hegemony, and corporate power. Since then we have seen multinational corporations booted out of countries and defiantly confronted by social movements, U.S. ambassadors expelled from three nation's capitals, free trade agreements protested, illegitimate foreign debts challenged, and U.S. drug policies rejected. In addition, alternative political and economic institutions and policies have been advocated and created.

Venezuela's Chavez developed the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), an antithesis to the FTAA that advocates a trade regime based on economic, social, and political integration guided by the principals of solidarity and cooperation. Even Honduras, long seen as a U.S. satellite state dating back to the days it assisted Washington in overthrowing Guatemala's government in 1954, has joined ALBA, showing that the creeping tide of Bolivarianism is extending to the still fragile Central America. Meanwhile, Brazil's Lula de Silva, viewed by Washington and the U.S. corporate media as part of the "acceptable" or "responsible" left, declared in 2007 that "Developing nations must create their own mechanisms of finance instead of suffering under those of the IMF and the World Bank, which are institutions of rich nations . . . it is time to wake up." And the region has woken up as the "Bank of the South" was formed to make development loans without the draconian economic prescriptions of Washington-controlled financial institutions, which in the past have forced countries to cut social spending, deregulate industries, and open markets to foreign capital — policies that have exacerbated poverty and inequality in the past and as a result compounded dependence on foreign capital and Washington.

In terms of security cooperation, both Brazil and Venezuela have led efforts to create a South American Defense Council, a NATO-style regional body that would coordinate defense policies, deal with internal conflicts and presumably diminish Washington's influence in its "backyard." While U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said back in March that Washington "had no problem with it" and looked "forward to coordination with it," Bloomberg News reported that Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim told Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley that the United States should "watch from the outside and keep its distance," and that "this is a South American council and we have no obligation to ask for a license from the United States to do it." In a similar challenge to U.S. military presence and influence, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa decided to force the United States to close its military base in the port city of Manta. And then there is China's and Russia's growing economic and political ties to the region — something that would not only be unheard of in the past, but not tolerated.

Developments such as these led the Council on Foreign Relations to declare in May that the "era of the United States as the dominant influence in Latin America is over." Frank Bajak, writing for the Associated Press on Oct. 11, echoed this observation when he wrote, "U.S. clout in what it once considered its backyard has sunk to perhaps the lowest point in decades" and that "it's unlikely to be able to leverage economic influence in Latin America anytime soon." Meanwhile, The Washington Post took a more indignant and belligerent position in an Oct. 6 editorial when it questioned whether Washington should "continue to subsidize governments that treat it as an enemy" while "a significant part of Latin America continues to march away from the 'Washington consensus' of democracy and free-market capitalism that has governed the region for a generation."

Laboratory for Counterinsurgency

While conventional thinking has led many to believe that Latin America's independence from the United States may be an irreversible paradigm shift, behind the scenes Washington has put into place policies that could unleash a reign of terror not seen since the 1980's. Colombia has served as laboratory for this new counterinsurgency program that can be interpreted as a continuance of U.S. supported state terrorism and a re-emergence of the national security state in Latin America.

The U.S. government has sent more than \$5 billion in mostly military and counter-narcotics assistance to Colombia since 2000 to fund "Plan Colombia," a counter drug program said to be designed to fight cocaine production and narco-trafficking, as well as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), in turn further intensifying the country's long-standing civil war. But as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) reported in 2001 in a study sponsored by the Center for Responsive Politics, "The protection of U.S. oil and trade interests is also a key factor in the plan, and historic links to drug-trafficking right-wing guerrillas by U.S. allies belie an exclusive commitment to extirpating drug trafficking."

The ICIJ investigation also found that "Major U.S. oil companies have lobbied Congress intensely to promote additional military aid to Colombia, in order to secure their investments in that country and create a better climate for future exploration of Colombia's vast potential reserves." In addition, corporations with interests in the region were reported to have spent almost \$100 million lobbying Congress to affect U.S. Latin America policy.

Eight years later, Colombia has evolved into a full-fledged paramilitary state. President Álvaro Uribe, Washington's staunchest ally in the region, his extended family, and many of his political supporters in the government and military are under investigation for ties to paramilitaries and right-wing death squads. As far as U.S. corporate collusion goes, Chiquita Brands International Inc. was forced to pay the U.S. Justice Department a \$25 million settlement in 2007 for giving over \$1 million to the right-wing terrorist organization United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Even more damaging is the fact that Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, at the time assistant attorney general, knew about the company's relationship with AUC and did nothing to stop it. Alabama-based coal company Drummond Co., Inc. and Coca-Cola have also been accused of hiring right-wing death squads to intimidate, murder or disappear trade unionists. This is what the ICIJ meant when they wrote about securing investments and creating a "better climate" for business.

According to the U.S. Labor Education on the Americas Project, Colombia accounts for more than 60 percent of trade unionists killed worldwide. There have also been at least 17 murders of trade unionists just this year, which, according to a report released in April 2008, accounts for an 89 percent increase in murders over the same time period from 2007. Meanwhile, The Washington Post reported in August that the collateral damage from Colombia's civil war has resulted in more disappearances than occurred in El Salvador and Chile, while Colombia's attorney general believes there could be as many as 10,000 more bodies scattered across the country — meaning totals would surpass those from Argentina and Peru.

Despite what should be considered as a total failure from a policy and, more importantly, human rights standpoint, this same Colombian model has been promoted by Washington to other nations in the region, and — remarkably — has been embraced by these countries. In 2005, Guatemalan officials called for their own "Plan Guatemala," while Oscar Berger, president at the time, asked for a permanent DEA station in the country and for U.S. military

personnel to conduct anti-narcotics operations. In addition, he was a proponent of a regional rapid deployment force, initially conceived to fight gangs, but later adjusted to include counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism in order to attract U.S. support. It should be noted that the AFL-CIO, along with six Guatemalan unions, filed a complaint, allowed through labor provisions of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), on April 23, 2008, charging the Guatemalan government with not upholding its labor laws and for failing to investigate and prosecute crimes against union members — which include rape and murder. This speaks to the idea of securing a “business-friendly” climate like in Colombia, which many in Washington want to reward with a free trade agreement. Guatemala’s government is currently led by President Alvaro Colom, a politician who represents the country’s ruling oligarchs. Pre-election violence during his campaign claimed the lives of over 50 candidates (or their family members) and political activists, in a country Amnesty International reports is infested with “clandestine groups” comprised of members of “the business sector, private security companies, common criminals, gang members and possibly ex and current members of the armed forces” responsible for targeting human rights activists.

This regional militaristic strategy finally materialized into policy on June 30 when President Bush signed into law the Meridia Initiative, or “Plan Mexico,” which according to Laura Carlsen of the Americas Program “could allocate up to \$1.6 billion to Mexico, Central American, and Caribbean countries for security aid to design and carry out counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security measures.”

Just one day later, investigative journalist Kristen Bricker reported that a video had surfaced showing a U.S.-based private security company teaching torture techniques to Mexican police. This led Amnesty International to call for an investigation on July 3 to determine why techniques such as “holding a detainee down in a pit full of excrement and rats and forcing water up the nostrils of the detainee in order to secure information” were being taught. Later in July the Inter Press Service published a story about a 53-page report on Human Rights and Conflicts in Central America 2007-2008 that suggested “Central America is backsliding badly on human rights issues, and social unrest could flare up into civil wars like those experienced in the last decades of the 20th century.”

Nevertheless, Washington continues to push for the re-militarization of the region, as evidenced by a \$2.6 million aid package given to El Salvador in October to “fight gangs.” Coincidentally, this was announced just months after the Inter Press Service reported in a June 16 article that U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte “expressed concern over supposed ties between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN),” while also announcing that “the Bush administration is on the alert to Iran’s presence in Central America.”

### Playing the Terror Card

In order to up the ante as a means of promoting this militaristic vision for the Americas and to vilify strategic “enemies” such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Washington has added the “War on Terror” into the equation by spreading unfounded allegations about Islamic terrorist infiltration into the region.

Journalists Ben Dangl and April Howard of Upside Down World, reporting for EXTRA! in Oct. 2007, wrote “In the Cold War, Washington and the media used the word ‘communism’ to rally public opinion against political opponents. Now, in the post- September 11 world, there is a new verbal weapon — ‘terrorism.’” This puts into context Washington’s evidence-lacking

assertions that the Tri-Border Area, where Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina meet, is a hub for Islamic Terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, claims the mainstream media have obsequiously parroted, yet Dangi and Howard helped disprove. Dangi and Howard, reporting from Ciudad del Este, a city located in the center of this alleged “hotbed” of terrorism, talked with Paraguayan officials, as well as local residents, all of whom denied there was any presence of foreign terrorist groups. They pointed out that the governments of Brazil and Argentina have also denied the claims. But the terrorist assertions haven’t stopped there.

Norman A. Bailey, a former U.S. spy chief for Cuba and Venezuela, testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on July 17 that “financial support has been provided [by drug traffickers] to insurgent groups in certain countries, most notoriously to the FARC in Colombia, as well as to ETA, the Basque separatist organization, and most importantly to Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, through their extensive network in Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America.”

The State Department’s David M. Luna, Director for Anticrime Programs, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, gave a statement on Oct. 8 claiming that international terrorist organizations will collaborate with regional criminal networks to smuggle WMD’s across the U.S.’s border with Mexico.

“Fighting transnational crime must go hand in hand with fighting terrorists, if we want to ensure that we ‘surface them,’” stated Luna. He also went on to regurgitate the empty claims of the Tri-Border Islamic threat.

That same day the Associated Press reported that U.S. officials were concerned with alliances being formed by terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and Hezbollah and Latin American drug cartels.

“The presence of these people in the region leaves open the possibility that they will attempt to attack the United States,” said Charles Allen, a veteran CIA analyst. “The threats in this hemisphere are real. We cannot ignore them.”

And on Oct. 21 The Los Angeles Times reported that U.S. and Colombian officials allegedly dismantled a drug and money laundering ring used to finance Hezbollah.

This post-Sept. 11 fear-mongering, being carried out for years now, has served as a pretext for Washington to deploy Special Operations troops in embassies across the globe, including Latin America, “to gather intelligence on terrorists...for potential missions to disrupt, capture or kill them.”

The New York Times, which broke the story on March 8, 2006, reported that this initiative, led by then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, was an attempt to broaden the U.S. military’s role in intelligence gathering. The soldiers, referred to as “Military Liaison Elements,” were initially deployed without the knowledge of local ambassadors. This changed after an armed robber in Paraguay was killed after attempting to rob a group of soldiers covertly deployed to the country. Senior embassy officials were “embarrassed” by the episode as the soldiers were operating out of a hotel, rather than the embassy.

But in a follow-up by The Washington Post on April 22, “the Pentagon gained the leeway to inform — rather than gain the approval of — the U.S. ambassador before conducting military operations in a foreign country” when deploying these “elite Special Operations Troops.”



This development has remained largely under the radar, with the exception of analysis by Just the Facts, a joint project of the Center for International Policy, the Latin American Working Group Education Fund, and the Washington Office on Latin America.

## A New Cold War?

In Oct. 2006 President Bush signed a waiver that authorized the U.S. military to resume certain types of training to a number of militaries in the region which had been suspended as a result of a bill intended to punish countries not signing bilateral agreements that would grant immunity to U.S. citizens from prosecution before the International Criminal Court.

Bush was forced to act as a result of Venezuela's growing influence in the region, as well as the "red" threat that China's growing business in the region presented.

"The Chinese are standing by and I can't think of anything that is worse than having those people go over there and get indoctrinated by them. And I think maybe we should address that because that's a very serious thing," said Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), at a March 14, 2008, hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), at the same hearing, said this was "a serious threat" and called for ending the restrictions on U.S. military training programs imposed on Latin American nations for refusing to sign the bilateral immunity agreements. Of course, Latin American nations should not be subject to sanctions for quite properly rejecting the immunity agreements; but neither should there be training programs for their repressive militaries, to teach these militaries repressive practices.

The Associated Press reported in Oct. that "China's trade with Latin America jumped from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$102.6 billion last year. [And] In May, a state-owned Chinese company agreed to buy a Peruvian copper mine for \$2.1 billion."

These developments should further perpetuate the "Red Scare" making its way through the Senate. Then there is Russia's military sales and cooperation with Venezuela. U.S. News and World Report's Alastair Gee wrote a fear-mongering article on Oct. 14, 2008, in which he stated, "This is not the first time Russians have sought close links with Latin America. In 1962, the stationing of Soviet missiles in Cuba nearly precipitated nuclear war with the United States. The Soviets also funded regional communist parties and invited students from the region to study in Soviet universities."

But more importantly, it is the region's "march away from the 'Washington consensus' of democracy and free-market capitalism" that has drummed up a cold war mentality in Washington. With democratically elected presidents in the region openly embracing socialism and socialist-style policies, economic programs in various countries that include nationalizing industries and "redistributing the wealth", and social movements ideologically and physically confronting free market capitalism, it should come as no surprise that anti-globalization movements have found themselves classified as a national security threat to the United States. A declassified April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate entitled "Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States," states, "Anti-U.S. and anti-globalization sentiment is on the rise and fueling other radical ideologies. This could prompt some leftist, nationalist, or separatist groups to adopt terrorist methods to attack US interests."

## Moving Forward

Developments in Latin America are reason for hope and optimism that “a new, better and possible world” could be on the horizon. But these very same reasons are cause for concern.

With Washington’s imperial stretch on the decline, both militarily and economically, both history and current conditions suggest it will try to reassert itself in Latin America — just as it did after Vietnam.

But because of the deeply embedded and institutionalized nature of Washington’s imperial machine, it doesn’t matter much which party controls the White House and Congress. To fight these developments, we need to continue to grow grassroots media projects and support independent journalists, build long-term solidarity with Latin American social movements and build social movements in the United States, fight free trade and do our part to shed light upon the structural violence threatening Latin America’s promising future — which is directly tied to ours.

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