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**Two Decades Out of the Whirlpool:  
*Past (and possible Future) United States  
Interventions in Latin America***

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Ph.D. Candidate

**September 2011**

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*The views expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, Department of Defense, US Southern Command or Florida International University.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the history of U.S. interventions in Latin America and attempts to explain their frequency by highlighting two factors—besides security and economic interests—that have made American interventions in Latin America so common. First, immense differences in size and influence between the United States and the States of Latin America have made interventions appear to be a low risk solution to crises that threaten American interests in the region. Second, when U.S. government concerns and aspirations for Latin America converge with the general fears and aspirations of American foreign policy, interventions become much more likely. Such a convergence pushes Latin American issues high up the U.S. foreign policy agenda because of the region’s proximity to the United States and the perception that the costs of intervening are low. This leads proponents of intervention to begin asking questions like “if we cannot stop communism/revolutions/drug-trafficking in Latin America, where can we stop it?”

This article traces how these factors influenced the decision to intervene in Latin America during the era of Dollar Diplomacy and during the Cold War. It concludes with three possible scenarios that could lead to a reemergence of an American interventionist policy in Latin America. It makes the argument that even though the United States has not intervened in Latin America during the twenty-two years, it is far from clear that American interventions in Latin America will be consigned to the past.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2001, Robert Pastor published an expanded second edition of his widely acclaimed study of the dynamics of U.S.-Latin American relations *A Whirlpool: U.S Foreign Policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean* only under a new title, *Exiting the Whirlpool*, which argued that the future of U.S.-Latin American relations was not necessarily a hostage of its past.<sup>1</sup> In the short-term he appears to have been right. December 2011 should bring about a new milestone in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. Barring any unforeseen actions this will mark the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Operation Just Cause making it the longest period in U.S.-Latin American relations without a unilateral American intervention since the Spanish American War.<sup>2</sup> By some counts the United States has intervened in Latin America hundreds of times during the last 150 years. These interventions ranged from short-term missions to protect American lives and property to full military occupations, that included imposition of military governments, American administered financial sectors, and American supervised elections.

Military interventions have been a regular fixture in the history of American foreign relations with the region since the 1890s, with the exception of two periods: the “Good Neighbor” era between 1932 and 1954 and from 1989 to the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *A Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Robert A. Pastor. *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Operation Just Cause was the name of the U.S. Military operation that removed Manuel Noriega from power in Panama.

present. This later period now needs to be recognized as a significant era in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. However, it would be naïve to think that this is an entirely new era of U.S.-Latin American relations and that interventions are now consigned to the past. By surveying the history of American interventions in Latin America and paying special attention to the contexts from which they emerged, this essay will offer an explanation why American interventions have been so frequent. Finally, this essay will examine the possible developments in U.S.-Latin American relations that could lead to a reemergence of a policy of intervention.

Defining what is and is not an American “intervention” in Latin America is a complicated issue. All States do their best to influence the policies of other States in ways that are favorable to them through diplomacy. At what point these attempts cease to be diplomatic and begin to be interventions depends on the criteria chosen. Two criteria will be used in the definition of intervention in this essay. The first is whether American uniformed military personnel were unilaterally deployed for the purpose of obtaining a political objective. The second is whether the U.S. military and intelligence communities played a decisive role in empowering a domestic faction to bring about a political change that was favored by the United States. By these criteria most landings of U.S. troops during the Dollar Diplomacy era (1905-1932) and Operation Just Cause in 1989 would be considered interventions while the U.S. response to the Haitian Earthquake of 2010 would not. Similarly U.S. operation PBSUCCESS in Guatemala in 1954

and the Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba in 1961 would be considered interventions.<sup>3</sup>

## **EXPLAINING AMERICAN INTERVENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA**

The frequency of American armed interventions in Latin America during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has made them a topic of much debate. Scholars attempting to explain these interventions can generally be placed into two categories: apologists and prosecutors. The apologists explain American interventions by arguing that American policymakers have genuinely believed that Latin America is an area of vital importance to the United States and so it has intervened there repeatedly in the name of national security, even if in retrospect some of these threats appear to have been exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> The prosecutors reject any explanations that maintain American security concerns in the region were

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<sup>3</sup> Not all incidents in U.S. Latin-American relations can be neatly categorized according to these criteria. For example it is unclear whether or not the CIA played a “decisive” role in the 1973 coup that killed Chilean President Salvador Allende or whether American support for the Nicaraguan Contras played a “decisive” role in the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990. However, decisive or not, both of these incidents produced political fallout in Latin America similar to that of more clear cases of intervention and so are more similar in their effects to the type of intervention considered in this essay regardless of how they are classified.

<sup>4</sup> For a sampling of the “apologists” see, G. Pope Atkins, *Latin America and the Caribbean in the International System* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1943); Dana G. Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921* (Princeton, IN: Princeton University Press, 1964); Thomas Leonard, *Central America and the United States: The Search for Stability* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

genuine. Instead, they decry these interventions as neocolonial ventures attempting to establish American economic and cultural dominance in the region.<sup>5</sup>

The arguments of each group have some merit. American security and economic interests in the region are real and have from time to time been threatened. However, both arguments fail to give a plausible explanation for why American policymakers have so frequently chosen intervention as a means to defend American interests there. The “prosecutors” that claim that economics and power were primary motivations fails to explain why the United States intervened most frequently in the areas where Americans had the least invested, such as Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Also while there is evidence that American business interests certainly have lobbied the State Department to defend their interests, there is little evidence that this lobbying had much effect.<sup>6</sup> The “apologists” also have difficulty explaining why the United States resorted to interventions to defend their security interests in the region when other policies could have addressed their concerns just as effectively. For example denying foreign powers the right

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<sup>5</sup> A few examples of the “prosecutors” would be Harold Denny, *Dollars for Bullets: The Story of American Rule in Nicaragua* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Karl Bermann, *Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States Since 1848* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1986); Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Stephen C Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Anchor Books ed. (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of the American business lobby’s activities during Dollar Diplomacy see Benjamin T Harrison, *Dollar Diplomat: Chandler Anderson and American Diplomacy in Mexico and Nicaragua, 1913-1928* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988). See also the discussion of the 1954 intervention in Guatemala below.



to intervene in Latin America could probably have been accomplished through American naval power alone by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and such a policy would have undoubtedly had the support of the majority of Latin American nations. That the United States chose to forestall foreign interventions with their own interventions certainly requires more explanation than just concerns over security.

Besides security and economic interests there are two additional factors that need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the frequency of American interventions in Latin America. First, the vast differences in size, wealth, and perceived influence between the United States and the republics of Latin America make interventions more likely because these immense differences have often caused American policymakers to overestimate their ability to effect change in the region. This recurring miscalculation makes interventions seem like low risk and relatively simple solutions when political turmoil threatens U.S interests. This miscalculation is sustained by interventions that have turned out to be every bit as easy as they were supposed to be, such as the 1954 overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and the 1989 overthrow of Manuela Noriega in Panama, both of which obtained their objectives with minimal costs to the U.S. in the short term. The same miscalculation can also make the costs of not intervening seem high in certain political climates. For example, during the Cold War the cost of intervening in Latin America seemed to pale in comparison to the political cost of allowing a “second Cuba” to be created in Latin America, as Jimmy Carter would find out when he was constantly hounded by Republicans for having “lost” Nicaragua after 1979. In short one of the reasons that the U.S. has intervened so frequently in Latin America is because the cost of doing

so in many situations has seemed lower than the cost of not intervening.

Second, interventions are more likely to occur when American fears about or aspirations regarding Latin America coincide with the major fears and aspirations of American foreign policy at the time. Such a convergence pushes Latin American issues high up the U.S. foreign policy agenda because of their proximity to the United States and, since the costs of intervention in Latin America are perceived to be low, proponents of intervention eventually begin asking questions like “if we cannot stop communism/revolutions/drug-trafficking in Latin America, where can we stop it?” For example American fears about the spread of communism in general during the Cold War made anxiety over its presence in Latin America particularly extreme. Conversely, when the dominant fears and issues of U.S. foreign policy do not coincide with those Americans have about Latin America, intervention is unlikely. For example when Nicaraguan President and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega came to power in 1979 there was such widespread fear among conservative American policymakers that it eventually led to covert operations against the Sandinistas, culminating in the Iran-Contra scandal. However, when Ortega came to power through elections again in 2007, George W. Bush telephoned him to say congratulations.<sup>7</sup> In 1979 Ortega’s rise coincided with what was believed to be a global resurgence of communism, whereas in 2007 Ortega’s return to power in Nicaragua was no way connected to the dominate issues in American foreign policy: global terrorism and two foreign wars.

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<sup>7</sup> “Bush Congratulates New Nicaraguan President Ortega,” Reuters News, January 8, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/01/08/us-nicaragua-ortega-bush-idUSN0827392320070108>.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

These two factors, the supposed low cost of interventions and the convergence of Latin American issues with those of U.S. foreign policy in general, can be seen driving American interventions in the Caribbean Basin as early as the Spanish American War. Behind the jingoism that jauntily encouraged the U.S. to go to war with Spain was the argument that the vast resource of the U.S. made victory all but inevitable, if war broke out. The cost of liberating Cuba seemed so low that it would be a mistake not to do it. At the same time removing the Spanish from Cuba was a step towards achieving many of the goals of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. foreign policy for the region, which included continuing to minimize European influence in Latin America. Among others, historian Kristin L. Hoganson has suggested a more subtle convergence between the war and broader societal issues by arguing that gender issues played a role in the decision to go to war. A generation of American men raised in the relatively comfortable and prosperous post-Civil War Era worried that they were losing the rugged nature of their forebears and a war would be an excellent way of claiming a more martial masculinity.<sup>8</sup>

After the Spanish American War the United States took on a much more active role in Latin America, particularly the Caribbean Basin, and from 1905-1933 occupied Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic for extended periods of time, and landed troops in many more countries ostensibly to end revolutions and maintain stability. This period is generally known as the Dollar Diplomacy era, after the policy of President William Taft (1909 - 1912), which

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<sup>8</sup> Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

attempted to end instability in the region through a mixture of interventions and investments. There were both economic and strategic motivations for these interventions. From the perspective of American policymakers frequent “revolutions” throughout the Caribbean Basin damaged American property and investments and if these revolutions were not checked, they might serve as a pretext for European interventions. Ironically, this had been the case for much of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Caribbean Basin. Thus, the Dollar Diplomacy era was different because of the convergence between the issues of the Caribbean Basin and American fears and aspirations in foreign policy. Dollar Diplomacy coincided with the resurgence of European colonialism in Africa and Asia, which many believed was isolating the United States from economic opportunities abroad. The fear that this colonialism could be extended to the Caribbean Basin motivated American policymakers to take action to stop it.<sup>9</sup> Dollar Diplomacy also coincided with the height of the progressive movement in the United States and its impulse to bring reform. The success of reform movements at home turned the attention of the progressive’s abroad and created an American political environment that was receptive to the idea of intervention.<sup>10</sup> Finally, these interventions were also undertaken with the belief that they would be easy. Dana G. Munro, a diplomat-turned-scholar, who spent his years as a diplomat embroiled in these interventions and then spent

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<sup>9</sup> Dana G. Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 5 - 7.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the internationalism of American progressives see Alan Daley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); For work dealing the progressives in Latin America during the era see, Emily Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

his years as a scholar trying to explain them, concluded that one of the reasons interventions were so prevalent during this period was that intervening in “small weak states” seemed to involve little risk or expense, while the potential benefits seemed enormous.<sup>11</sup>

The best example is the decision to intervene in Nicaragua in 1912, which resulted in a nearly constant American presence there until 1932.<sup>12</sup> Beginning with Secretary of State Philander Knox’s decision to support a revolution against Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya and his immediate successors, American statesmen moved hesitantly down a path of attempting to turn Nicaragua into country that was both stable and prosperous. By doing so they could limit the likelihood of European intervention and also prove the desirability and effectiveness of American led reforms. In exchange for recognizing the rebels that overthrew Zelaya, the State Department urged the leaders of the revolution to sign a series of agreements known as the Dawson Pacts which they believed would put Nicaragua on a path towards democracy and financial stability. What they did not seem to consider is what would happen if the new leaders of Nicaragua did not abide by these pacts. The plan began to break down almost immediately and in 1912, the former Minister of War Luis Mena, who was more ambivalent to the United States, began a revolt against Nicaraguan President

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<sup>11</sup> Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> For some of the best overviews of the Nicaraguan interventions see Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921*, 160 - 210; Isaac Cox, *Nicaragua and the United States 1909 - 1927* (Boston, MA: World Peace Foundation Pamphlets, 1927); Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pt. II & III.

Adolfo Diaz, who was broadly supportive of the Dawson Pacts and American financial reorganization.

The political positions of the belligerents made it easy to view this conflict as a dispute over the future of American policy for Nicaragua. At the initial outbreak of hostilities, the U.S. Navy landed a small force to enter Managua as a legation guard, hoping this would intimidate Mena into ending the revolution. When Mena responded with a four-day bombardment of the city, killing over 100 women and children plus other casualties, President Taft became convinced a larger force was needed and U.S. Marines began landing in Nicaragua. The Marines' initial mission in Nicaragua was limited to protecting Americans and they remained neutral in the conflicts between the government and the rebels, largely because of a disagreement between the State Department and the Naval Commanders over the purpose of the Marines' mission in Nicaragua. American Naval Commanders on the scene warned that intervention would involve a long commitment to a country where the United States had few strategic interests, and so advised that the Marines should only be used to bring both sides to the negotiating table. State Department officials on the other hand wanted to make Nicaragua a test case of the United States' commitment to guaranteeing political and financial stability in the Caribbean Basin and so argued that the Marines must put down Mena's revolt. As Assistant Secretary of State Huntington-Wilson wrote to president Taft in the midst of the struggle with the Department of the Navy over intervention:

*We are having so much trouble in Mexico, in Cuba and in Panama, and we have had for so long frequently to express "grave concern"*

*and to lodge protests that what with the attitude of Senator Bacon's group in the Senate, which gives the impression that we are a house divided against itself, the authority of our words seems lessened. We think that if the United States did its duty promptly, thoroughly, and impressively in Nicaragua, it would strengthen our hand and lighten our task, not only in Nicaragua itself in the future, but throughout Central America and the Caribbean and would even have some moral effect in Mexico. Such consideration in addition to real apprehension for American citizens, especially in Matagalpa, and a feeling that excessive prudence was better than the risk of any untoward incident, have made this Department favor the most adequate preparations even if they should prove to have been out of proportion to the necessities.*<sup>13</sup>

In his letter to President Taft, Huntington-Wilson assigned a greater importance to the Nicaraguan situation than was justified by arguing that the United States needed to end the revolution there in order to send a message to the rest of the Caribbean Basin about what would and would not be tolerated, which would by extension send a message to Europeans that the United States was in control of the

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<sup>13</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Wilson to President Taft, August 30th 1912, doc. no. 817.00/1940a in United States, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Nicaragua, 1910-29, (Washington D.C.: The National Archives National Archives and Records Service General Services Administration, 1966), Roll 12.

Caribbean. By making his argument this way, Huntington-Wilson made Nicaragua into a symbol of the ills of the Caribbean Basin and the fears and ambitions the American policymakers had regarding that region and made a conflict that the United States should have been able to avoid into a test of principle that seemed to important to ignore. His reference to “preparations... out of proportion to the necessities” indicates that he did not think the intervention would be too costly or complicated.

The then U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua George T. Weitzel explained the choice facing the United States in similar terms. He told Secretary Knox if the United States acted decisively to stop Mena’s revolution it would have a "beneficial and lasting effect, not only in Nicaragua but throughout Central America." Furthermore, Weitzel argued that the United States had a responsibility to act, writing that “This is a disagreeable but none the less clear duty which we owe to our own self-respect and to Nicaragua which pleads for relief and to the cause of civilization and humanity in general.”<sup>14</sup> Incredibly Weitzel described the situation facing the United States as a crisis in which they had to take a symbolic stand for the cause of civilization, not as a choice between rescuing or not a poorly thought out scheme for the financial reorganization of Nicaragua—a place of minor financial and strategic importance even by Caribbean Basin standards. The convergence between the Nicaraguan situation and the more general fears and goals of American foreign policy combined with the perceived low cost of interventions there made a major issue out of a very minor revolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Ambassador Weitzel to Secretary Knox, September 17th, 1912, doc. no. 817.00/1988, Ibid.



The interventions of Dollar Diplomacy turned out to be neither cheap nor easy. While the casualties caused by the interventions in the Caribbean Basin were low by 20<sup>th</sup> Century standards, they greatly damaged U.S. relations with Latin America, as many Latin Americans failed to see any great distinctions between American interventionism and European colonialism. These interventions were also more frequently the beginning of a long entanglement rather than a quick solution to the political problems of the Caribbean Basin. Despite these high costs, there was little to show for these interventions.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1930s the policy itself was looking more like a security threat to the United States as it damaged hemispheric unity and cooperation just as the rise of Germany and Japan was becoming apparent. For the sake of hemispheric cooperation the interventionist policy of Dollar Diplomacy was explicitly disavowed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the first term of his presidency and replaced by what he called “The Good Neighbor” policy. At the 1933 International Conference of American States held in Montevideo, Uruguay, President Roosevelt announced that the United States would renounce its right to intervene in Latin America in exchange for greater cooperation from Latin American countries on hemispheric defense.<sup>16</sup> This new policy was generally regarded with favor in Latin America and between 1932 and 1954 the United States government refrained from intervening.

The U.S. sustained the principles of the Good Neighbor

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<sup>15</sup> True European incursions into Caribbean Basin had been avoided, but many at the time questioned how serious this threat was in the first place. American financial supervision did have some positive effects, but it had not made any of the countries that received it particularly prosperous.

<sup>16</sup> Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1961). Especially part III.

Policy until 1954, when the fears and challenges of the Cold War ushered in a new era of American interventions. The U.S. interventions during the Cold War were different from those of the Dollar Diplomacy era in many ways. They were ostensibly covert and so, used proxies rather than actual American forces, and when they employed American personnel, it was often members of the clandestine services rather than uniformed soldiers or marines. This is one of the reasons the interventions of the Cold War have a more odious reputation than those of previous eras. American officials routinely argued during the Dollar Diplomacy era that they were unashamedly intervening to defend principles rather than narrow national interests. Architects of intervention in the Cold War would occasionally attempt to make the same claim, but the secretive nature of the interventions and frequent disavowals of them seemed to indicate otherwise.

A striking similarity between the interventions of the Dollar Diplomacy era and those of the Cold War is how fears about Latin America again converged with the broader fears of American foreign policy to make Latin American political developments seem more dangerous than they probably were. For the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963 the presence of Soviet missiles on Cuba did make Latin America the “most dangerous place on earth” as Kennedy called it.<sup>17</sup> However, the Cuban missile crisis took place after, and in response to American interventions that attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961 (the Bay of Pigs invasion) and successfully overthrew the Arbenz Administration in Guatemala in 1954. Some interpretations

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

of the overthrow of the Arbenz regime focused on the machinations of the United Fruit Company and the importance of American financial interests in the Guatemalan intervention, but more recent scholarship has discounted this as a major motivation of the CIA and has instead focused on the ideological threat of Arbenz's pro-Soviet ideology.<sup>18</sup> Arbenz came to power in the middle of the Korean War and since American policymakers had committed themselves to stopping the spread of communism in far away Korea, it was difficult for them to be indifferent to its spread in Guatemala or to see that the two contexts were different.<sup>19</sup> It was the convergence between the American fears about the spread of communism in Asia and its presence in Latin America which caused them to view Arbenz as a threat to U.S security; a proposition that without this convergence would have seemed ridiculous. Unfortunately viewing Arbenz as a threat and treating him as such became a self-fulfilling prophecy as future communist regimes in Latin America came to power weary of the United States and more willing to look to the Soviets for support.

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<sup>18</sup> For economic interpretations of the intervention see Jos. M Aybar de Soto, *Dependency and Intervention: The Case of Guatemala in 1954* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978); Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit; For more ideological interpretations see Nick Cullather, Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala 1952-1954* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944 -1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Bryce Wood, *The Dismantling of the Good Neighbor Policy*, 1st ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), 152; Gleijeses, "Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944 -1954," 178 - 81.

That the overthrow of Arbenz was successful beyond expectations led to a shift in American thinking back in favor of interventions. Once again interventions came to be thought of as relatively easy and cheap ways to guarantee American interests in Latin America. Unfortunately the Kennedy Administration misinterpreted the CIA's involvement, rather than the active support of the Guatemalan army, as the key to the success of the overthrow of Arbenz; a mistake that greatly contributed to the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs Invasion.<sup>20</sup> As disastrous as it was, the Bay of Pigs did not destroy the American belief that it should be able to effect change in Latin America more easily than it could other places. Although the Kennedy Administration never fully gave up on trying to destroy the Cuban regime, it did change tactics when combating communism across the hemisphere. Rather than waiting for communist regimes to come to power, Kennedy tried to preempt them through his major initiative for Latin America, the Alliance for Progress. This highly ambitious project, based on the best thinking about development at the time, tried to make non-communist development a reality across Latin America. Latin America was chosen, as Kennedy told an aide because "Latin America is not like Asia or Africa. We can really accomplish something there."<sup>21</sup> The perceived convergence between Latin American communists and a Soviet dominated global communist movement stoked fears in the United States about political change in Latin America throughout the Cold War, while a belief that Latin America was a place Americans could "really accomplish something" drove interventionists policies.

The invasion of Panama in 1989 is the most recent U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 7 - 8.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 30.

action in Latin America and may be the best example of what future interventions in Latin America would look like. Operation Just Cause was the first, and so far only, unilateral U.S. intervention in Latin America in the post-Cold War era.<sup>22</sup> In many ways Operation Just Cause was more similar to the interventions of the Dollar Diplomacy era than to those of the Cold War and argues against the notion that strategic denial of access to Latin America of rival super powers has been the determining factor in American interventions in Latin America. Similar to the interventions of Dollar Diplomacy, the American policymakers believed Panama's head of state, Manuel Noriega's drug running, political repression, and antagonistic actions were threats to law and order in Central America and to American personnel in Panama. There was no fear that he might become an agent of a foreign power. Still, then Vice-President George H. W. Bush advocated vigorous action against Noriega on the grounds that "How can we make the argument we're getting tough on drug dealers if we let this guy off?"<sup>23</sup> Associating Noriega with the newly invigorated war on drugs in the late 1980s was a critical part of making the case to remove him.

U.S. relations with Noriega worsened once George H. W. Bush became president. Noriega's repression of democratic movements intensified and clashes between Panamanian and American soldiers became more frequent, even involving some casualties.<sup>24</sup> These pressures came to a head in October

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<sup>22</sup> Eytan Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (1996): 539.

<sup>23</sup> James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1995), 179.

<sup>24</sup> The option of dealing with Noriega in the Organization of American

of 1989 when an attempted coup by some of Noriega's own officers failed and the Bush Administration was sharply criticized for failing to decisively aid the plotters. The Bush Administration was in fact sympathetic with the officers, but the coup leaders themselves only asked for minimal American help and constant American fears that the plot was a trap set by Noriega to show the world the extent of American aggression hampered cooperation.<sup>25</sup> Warranted or not, the coup was portrayed as a failure of the Bush Administration and as the crisis grew more serious focus, shifted from Panama to the ability of the Bush Administration to wage the war on drugs, promote democracy in Latin America, and to lead the free world in an era when the international context seemed opportune for American leadership.<sup>26</sup> In this environment, the costs of not removing Noriega seemed to be higher than the cost of intervention and so the Administration determined that at the next opportunity the United States would act decisively.

The death of an American Marine, the beating of another, and the sexual assault of the latter's wife by the Panamanian Defense Forces all in the same incident was sufficient to convince the Bush Administration to order the overthrow of Noriega and execute the largest U.S. intervention in Latin America in American history. Although the security of the Panama Canal was occasionally mentioned in justifications of the intervention, the argument that Noriega posed a threat

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States (OAS) was also tried, but disagreements between member states kept the OAS from being effective in this situation.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management, June 1987-December 1989* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 2008), 256.

<sup>26</sup> Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited," 558.

to American security was never seriously considered. Noriega did, however, pose a clear threat to the safety of American citizens in Panama, especially those in uniform. As James Baker explained in his memoirs, American policymakers decided to remove Noriega after they came to the conclusion that American lives would continue to be lost whether or not they attempted the coup, and so it was better to go ahead and remove him, which might permanently resolve the issue.<sup>27</sup> A key assumption in this calculation was that no more than a few Americans would be killed in this action and here again the perceived differences in power between the United States and Latin American nations played a key role in the decision to intervene. In the case of Panama, however, American policymakers seemed to have been right. The overthrow of Noriega did prove to be a relatively simple operation, and, almost unique among American interventions in Latin America. It resulted in the establishment of a democracy rather than an authoritarian regime. At some point in the future, if pressure to intervene in Latin America reemerges, the Panamanian intervention will surely be cited by proponents of interventions as an example of what such actions can achieve.

The forgoing selective survey of American interventions in Latin America has argued that while American strategic and economic interests in the region play a role in the decision to intervene, other factors need to be included to give a plausible explanation for the frequency of American interventions. These additional factors are (1) that the vast differences in size, wealth, and perceived influence between the United States and the republics of Latin America made intervening there seem relatively low risk and (2) that

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<sup>27</sup> Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 189.

interventions are much more likely when the general fears and aspirations of American foreign policy converge with particular American fears and aspirations regarding Latin America.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

Surveying Latin America today it is reasonable to assume that the conditions that have discouraged unilateral American interventions there for the last twenty-two years might continue for sometime. One of these conditions is that during that time the major issues of U.S. foreign policy have not converged with the major issues in U.S.-Latin American relations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s the issues that have dominated American foreign policy have been failed states and international terrorism, neither of which is currently a major issue in U.S.-Latin American relations. With American attention focused on the Middle East and South Asia, the issues of drug-trafficking that currently prevail in the region and the reemergence of leftists regimes in Latin America have not gained much prominence in the United States, even though these are two issues that have previously been used to justify interventions. Also the two long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have turned the mood of the American people decisively against military interventions that might entail a long commitment. However, it would be naïve to assume that the United States will never again pursue a policy of unilateral intervention in Latin America. The rest of this section will be devoted to three possible scenarios that might lead to the reemergence of a policy of intervention.

These last two decades of U.S.-Latin American relations have not passed without challenges to American interests in



the region, the bulk of them coming from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. However, there seems little danger of Venezuela playing the role in the coming decades that Cuba under Fidel Castro played in Latin America in the 1960s. While inequality is still rampant in many Latin American countries, the anti-poverty programs of regional leaders such as Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* and Mexico's *Oportunidades* seemed to offer a more compelling development model for most Latin American countries than Hugo Chávez's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism.<sup>28</sup> This is no doubt partially attributable to the fact that under Hugo Chávez Venezuela's economic health has declined as his autocratic tendencies have increased, alienating many Latin American countries that do not directly profit from Venezuela's petroleum wealth. Neither have Hugo Chávez's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism or Bolivian Revolution become major issues in the United States, despite what at times seems like a concerted effort on Chávez's part to make them such. He has publicly and proudly sought to make common cause with other nations that espouse anti-American views, such as Iran, and has even invited the Russian Navy to undertake joint exercises with Venezuela, actions that would have alarmed American policymakers during the Cold War.<sup>29</sup>

The muted American response to Chávez may be because American policymakers have learned valuable lessons

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<sup>28</sup> "Happy families: An anti-poverty scheme invented in Latin America is winning converts worldwide," *The Economist*, February 7, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Miller Llana, "Hugo Chávez embraces Iran and Syria, wins Russian support for nuclear program," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2010; Simon Romero and Clifford J. Levy, "Mocking U.S., Chávez invites Russian Navy for exercises," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2008.

regarding the long-term diplomatic and political costs of intervention—even of those that seem successful in the short term. However, a greater part of the explanation is likely that despite all of his rhetoric and bombast, fears about Hugo Chávez do not converge with the broader issues of American foreign policy. Since the Al-Qaeda attacks on New York on September 11, 2001, the United States has faced an enemy so dedicated in its opposition to everything American and so determined to kill Americans and their allies abroad that in comparison Hugo Chávez, seems quaint and at times comedic.

The past however is no guarantee that Chávez will not become a target of American intervention in the future. The American led and then supported international mission against Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi may influence American views on interventions in support of democracy for the next several decades to come. The intervention against Qaddafi has reminded American policymakers that when it comes to responding to calls to protect democracy they have a range of responses available to them besides doing nothing or undertaking an Iraq-style nation building mission, which will likely remain unpopular for several decades. In Libya, the United States led a coalition that was willing to offer air support and supplies to a rebel group in order to support a regime change, but was unwilling to deploy any forces to ensure the success of the mission or to control the composition of the new regime after victory. The Libyan intervention was a definite departure from what was informally known as the "Pottery Barn Doctrine" ("you break it you buy it") propagated by Colin Powell and other less hawkish members of the Bush Administration, which argued that once the United States intervened they needed to see the mission through, presumably to an acceptable

(loosely defined) outcome.<sup>30</sup> In Libya the Obama Administration has demonstrated its willingness to “break things” without “buying” them and as a result interventions no longer seem as expensive as they did even just a few years ago. There has already been some talk of Libya becoming a template for future American interventions.<sup>31</sup> Such talk is directly relevant to U.S.-Latin American relations because Libya could be used as a precedent to justify some sort of action against a leader such as Chávez if he would attempt to maintain himself in power after losing a future election. This could theoretically happen as early as 2012. If violence erupted in a similar manner as in Libya and pro-democracy protesters appealed to the United States to support them against Chávez, the pressure on American policymakers to intervene in some fashion could be great, especially with Libya offering an example of what a cheap and effective intervention might look like.

Another possible scenario that could lead to the reemergence of a policy of unilateral intervention would be a renewal of superpower rivalries in the region. A constant theme in current discussions of American foreign policy is the rise of China, and what that means for the United States. Even if China’s rise turned out to be less than benign there are several reasons why it would be unlikely to spark a new Cold War between the U.S. and China in Latin America. Perceived Soviet gains in Latin America were so alarming for Americans because they represented a failure of the liberal political and economic ideology promoted by the United

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<sup>30</sup> William Safire, “Language: You break it, you own it, you fix it,” *New York Times* (New York, October 18, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> “Shields and Brooks on GOP’s Zeitgeist, Whether Obama Gets Credit for Libya,” *PBS Newshour* (PBS, August 26, 2011), [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec11/sandb\\_08-26.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec11/sandb_08-26.html).

States and its allies. China's rise, if anything, seems to prove the validity of liberal economic principals. Even if a liberal political ideology has not taken hold in China, the Chinese do not seem eager to export their own brand of authoritarianism, and even if they did it is far from certain that it would find fertile ground in Latin America. However, China's rise may well lead to competition in Latin America with the United States which might have unforeseen consequences, but it is unlikely that this competition would spark the type of conflict that would lead to unilateral American interventions. Political scientist and Sino-Latin America relations specialists He Li, writes that China's relationship with the United States is so much more important than anything they would likely gain from aggressively expanding into Latin America, that they will likely maintain a cautious Latin American policy.<sup>32</sup>

Still there are those who view international politics as a zero sum game and so China's investments in Latin America represent a loss of American influence in the region and a potential security threat.<sup>33</sup> While this is still a minority view, the outbreak of a conflict in Asia that saw the U.S. and China on opposite sides could quickly and drastically change perceptions of Chinese influence in Latin America, similar to the way the outbreak of the Korean War shifted American perceptions of Soviet influence in the region. If the Cold War was able to turn Guatemala into a security threat, conflict between the United States and China would almost certainly

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<sup>32</sup> He Li, "China's Growing Interest in Latin America and Its Implications," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4-5 (August 1, 2007): 833-862.

<sup>33</sup> Kerry Dumbaugh, *China's Growing Interest in Latin America* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Information Service Library of Congress, 2005), 5 - 6.

turn Venezuela, by one metric the largest recipient of Chinese aid and investment in Latin America, into a major worry for American policymakers.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the expansion of drug cartels into Central America is another scenario that could lead to a reemergence of U.S. intervention in the region. The aggressive actions taken by the Mexican government in the last few years against drug cartels has pushed many of them out of Mexico and into places like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.<sup>35</sup> The drug cartels' ability to infiltrate local governments and law enforcement in Mexico was one of the most frightening examples of their power and if the Mexican state, which is strong by comparison, was susceptible to such infiltration the threats to these Central American governments are grave.

The danger of a narco-state developing in Central America is perhaps the most likely scenario for the reemergence of a policy of American intervention in the region, for several reasons. First, for nearly twenty years the United States has taken an especially firm stance on narcotics, which has focused as much on interdicting foreign supply as on curbing domestic demand. While this type of war on drugs has been far from successful, it appears to have succeeded in breaking the power of the Colombian cartels. This limited success could serve as a template and a precedent for the U.S. military to take aggressive action in Central America if the cartels began to expand their influence there. Second, though

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<sup>34</sup> For information on Chinese investment in Venezuela see Thomas Lum, "China's Assistance and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia" (Congressional Research Service, 2009), 15.

<sup>35</sup> "Central America's Woes: The Drug War Hits Central America," *The Economist*, April 16, 2011.

America has many partners in its war on drugs, this cooperation is typically bilateral. Given the relative weakness of the States of Central America it is likely that any bilateral cooperation with the United States to combat the drug trade would be in fact American dominated initiatives that could lead to greater involvement in their internal affairs. It is possible to imagine a scenario where American policymakers believe the governments of these States to be so compromised that it would pursue unilateral action to combat the trade. Third, these cartels' reputation for brutal violence and mass killing along with the damage their trade does to American society could nullify what otherwise might be strong domestic opposition to any intervention in Central America, especially if Americans believe the problem could be taken care of quickly. Those Americans who demand increasingly harsh sentencing for drug defenders domestically would surely argue, as President H. W. Bush did against Noriega, that the United States cannot win the war on drugs at home if they lose it in Central America. They could also cite Operation Just Cause as a precedent that unilateral interventions in such cases can be effective, relatively low cost, and even popular.

American policymakers are not oblivious to the dangers of the drug trade moving into Central America and have been working with governments in the region to combat the trade and prevent further penetration.<sup>36</sup> Recognizing the problem early and formulating a response to it is certainly better than being caught unaware, but it is not necessarily a sure way of preventing the need for intervention or further involvement. Taking a firm stance against drug cartels in Central America

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<sup>36</sup> "Rounding up the Governments: Central America's Leaders and Their Neighbours Are at Last Starting to Co-Operate, but the Mafias Still Lead the Way in Regional Integration," *The Economist*, June 23, 2011.

could be the first step towards a policy where the United States assumes responsibility for Central American security. A similar sequence of events happened at the Washington Conference of 1907 when Central American leaders and American diplomats gathered to sign agreements intended to end revolutions in there. The leaders agreed to stay neutral in Central American civil wars and also to deny recognition to any regimes that came to power through revolution.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to expectations, the agreements did not prevent revolutions but *did* place more pressure on the United States to act to prevent them since the United States assumed the unofficial role of the guarantor of the agreements signed.<sup>38</sup> Decisive involvement in issues in Latin America for the U.S. has sometimes been a recipe for future interventions rather than quicker solutions.

That none of these scenarios seem especially imminent is a testament to the development of the U.S.- Latin American relationship in the past several years and also an acknowledgement that American foreign policy has been, and still is, largely focused elsewhere. Yet, all of these scenarios contain a possible set of circumstances that might once again bring about a convergence between Latin American issues and the major fears and aspirations of American foreign policy, and so push Latin American issues back up near the top of the American foreign policy agenda. Given the perceived low costs intervention in Latin America if democracy is threatened, American interests are in danger of being supplanted, or drug cartels seem to be on the verge

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<sup>37</sup> Buchanan, William I., *The Central American Peace Conference* (Washington D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1908), 41.

<sup>38</sup> For the effects of the Washington Conference on U.S.-Central American Relations see Dana G Munro and David Kinley, *The Five Republics of Central America* (Oxford, 1918), chap. 10.

of taking over a small state calls for intervention will surely follow and over time could become irresistible.

## **CONCLUSION**

The frequency of American interventions in Latin America cannot be explained by security and economic interests alone. This essay has argued that two other factors need to be taken into account to explain why interventions have been so common. First, immense differences in size and influence between the United States and the States of Latin America make interventions appear to be a low risk solution to crises that threaten American interests there. Second, when American fears about and aspirations for Latin America converge with the general fears and aspirations of American foreign policy interventions become much more likely. For the last two decades the absence of such a convergence has prevented Latin America from gaining the level of importance necessary for American policymakers to consider intervention as a possible policy response to regional crises. However, the foundation on which previous policies of intervention have been built still exists and so it would be overly optimistic to think such a policy could not reemerge.

Robert Pastor described U.S.-Latin American relations as a “whirlpool” in 2001, but argued persuasively that it was a trap that both parties could exit by shifting their perceptions of each other and their definitions of sovereignty.<sup>39</sup> Ten years later, whether the United States and Latin America have permanently “exited” this whirlpool is still unclear. During the twenty-two years of the Good Neighbor policy,

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<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Pastor. *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), especially Part III.



interventions seemed to be consigned to the past, only to reemerge suddenly when the fear of communism proliferated during the early Cold War. Time will tell whether the Western Hemisphere has truly entered a new era in its interstate relations, or whether the past twenty-two years have been another long hiatus from an American interventionist policy while it was occupied elsewhere. The U.S. response to the next major crisis in U.S.-Latin American relations where the issues in question converge with the broader issues of American foreign policy will go some way towards answering this question.

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