

# Take Another Look at Latin America

Since the end of the Cold War, the American public and even the U.S. government appear to have lost almost all interest in Latin America, apart from immigration questions. While the Cold War was active, the Soviet Union had the will and the capability to distract the United States severely by promoting Communist upheavals and governments in this hemisphere. President Eisenhower approved what amounted to an invasion of Guatemala in 1954, when the United Fruit Company complained that the government of Jacobo Arbenz was nationalizing part of its plantations and canning operations at unreasonable compensation in a land-reform scheme. (The Arbenz government alleged, probably with some reason, that the company had been exploiting Guatemalan cheap labor for generations.) The regime had been elected and was moderate, but it accepted some support from local Communists. When a Swedish ship arrived in Guatemala carrying Czech artillery, rifles, and side arms for a special militia that Arbenz was setting up, because he believed (correctly) that the army's senior officers had been bribed by the CIA, Eisenhower approved a farcical insurgency, in which 150 ragged CIA hirelings squatted in the jungle just inside the Honduran border, led by a dissident Guatemalan officer. (To call them soldiers of fortune would exaggerate their discipline, energy, and clarity of motives.) Honduran radio announced that a democratic revolutionary "front" was marching on Guatemala City.

Eisenhower gave two P-51 fighters to the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, and Somoza gave the two P-51s he already possessed to the "front"; they were flown by CIA agents as they did a little strafing and bombing around the capital. The U.S. imposed a sea blockade, proclaimed the application of the Monroe Doctrine, and squelched British and French objections

to interception of ships on the high seas by threatening to support Egyptian control of the Suez Canal and the independence movements in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. (It might have been better for everybody if no one had backed down.) Arbenz fled, and the head of the "front" succeeded him as president.

The paroxysms of rage and concern that the Castros stirred up in Cuba for the last 30 years of the Cold War, especially in the Missile Crisis of 1962, need hardly be recounted. It is worth remembering that the CIA, which made such an unspeakable shambles of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, failed to notice the arrival of two whole Soviet divisions in Cuba in 1962, or the delivery and installation of nuclear-tipped short-range missiles that would have greeted the invasion that the senior military and intelligence advisers to President Kennedy almost unanimously recommended. So seriously was the threat of installation of Soviet intermediate-range missiles in Cuba taken by the Kennedy administration that it withdrew NATO missiles from Turkey and Italy, and promised not to invade Cuba, to secure the abandonment of the Soviet plan to deploy the nuclear-equipped missiles and bombers to Cuba. (It was no strategic victory for the U.S. but was adroit crisis management by Kennedy, given that intelligence blunders had allowed matters to get to such a point before the Americans discovered the presence of missile launchers.)

Fidel Castro did what he could for decades to spread Communist revolution throughout Latin America, most famously with the ill-conceived mission of Ernesto "Che" Guevara to Bolivia in 1966, where he was captured and executed. The election of Salvador Allende, with only 36 percent of the vote, to the presidency of Chile as a semi-Communist in 1970 caused a very serious concern, especially when he ignored his promises to the congress and the supreme court to respect the democratic constitution and began to transform Chile into a Communist state. While leftist claims, especially by the egregious

mountebank Christopher Hitchens, of direct intervention by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, are largely unfounded, the U.S. undoubtedly made it clear to the leaders of the Chilean armed forces that it would not object to a coup d'état, and the coup came. As recently as the mid-Eighties, the Reagan administration was seriously embarrassed in the Iran-Contra affair, in which weapons were cycled through Iran to the Nicaraguan rebels against the pro-Communist Sandinista government in a process in which some American hostages seized by pro-Iranian factions in Lebanon were released.

That was practically the last national-security incident that involved the U.S. in Latin America. Mikhail Gorbachev, under the financial pressures that Ronald Reagan imposed by trading Saudi Arabia advanced military equipment in exchange for a reduction in oil price, could no longer afford to keep Cuba on a financial lifeline, and the 40-year madness of Castroite insurgency around the continent sputtered to an end. Augusto Pinochet, whatever his infelicities in the detention and interrogation of political opponents in Chile, imported a group of University of Chicago economists who swiftly put Chile on a fast economic track that had not been tried in Latin America before. Thereafter, the United States has rarely evinced the slightest interest in who was governing in what Franklin D. Roosevelt used to call, with his splendid patrician condescension, "our sister republics." The Sandinistas, defeated in Nicaragua, returned; Hugo Chávez, an outright Communist, took over Venezuela in 1999; the idiocies of the Peronists, always demagogically anti-American, became ever more expensive to the fundamentally rich country of Argentina (which had the same standard of living as Canada at the end of World War II). A nativist-socialist left-wing government took over Bolivia, and a thoroughly socialist regime, not above the old local tricks like staging false coups, was elevated in Ecuador. And in mighty Brazil, a thrice-defeated candidate of the far left, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was elected and re-elected, and proved an amenable and

successful leader. The United States, which had so often scrambled Marines or the CIA to prevent hostile regimes susceptible to Nazi or Communist influence in the hemisphere, lay like an inert crocodile, even its nostrils rarely tickled by the gentle ripples of the post-Soviet Left in Latin America.

In the rout of international Communism, Latin America lurched to the generally democratic center, military governments became unfashionable, and the era of the absurdly over-bemedaled juntas passed into Ruritanian history. Pinochet had voluntarily handed over power to democracy in 1990. Deregulation, tax reduction, elemental acts of government streamlining and incentivization of investment, tariff reductions and reduction of public-sector subsidization – all helped stabilize political systems, harden currencies, and promote economic growth. There was great progress in certain targeted areas, such as illiteracy in Brazil (the world's fifth most populous country at 200 million), which fell from 50 percent in 1970 to less than 15 percent in 2010. As democracy gained strength and hyper-inflation and debt defaults subsided, popular ambition naturally generated enthusiasm for redistributive economics, ranging from the moderate Left in Uruguay to the far Left in Bolivia (where the native/Spanish divide complicated the issue), to semi-Castroite Communism under Chávez in Venezuela. There was amplified direct assistance in many countries to the most disadvantaged, reducing inequalities, but the democratic Left has now failed in most of Latin America, as economic growth has withered and over-reliance on single resources, as always, has proved hazardous. The Peronist Kirchners are finally being pried loose from the presidency of Argentina after twelve years of almost unmitigated failure, apart from demagogic flourishes. Lula's successor in Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, though narrowly re-elected, has been totally immersed in a crumbling economy compounded by a scandal as vast and trackless as the Mato Grosso. The successor to the deceased Chávez (1999 to

2013) in Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, appears to be almost eager to be relieved of his parliamentary majority, to begin exiting the horrible mess he inherited and made worse, in a December election that should ensure the phased disembarkation of this ghastly regime.

Colombia and Mexico are reasonably sensibly governed, but are much complicated by the infamous American War on Drugs that has turned sections of both countries into combat zones. In Colombia, the rural leftist guerrilla movement, dating back nearly 70 years, is now almost entirely financed by the drug cartels. If the United States used its immense armed forces to prevent the importation of drugs without unduly inconveniencing legitimate commerce and tourism, or legalized drugs while requiring treatment for hard-drug users, the harrowing conditions of Mexico and Colombia would abate.

All of this raises some interesting perspectives on the Latin American policy of Pope Francis, the first pope from that region. Francis badly disappointed his co-religionists by his failure, in his recent visit to Cuba, to insist on meeting the Ladies in White or to give any other solace to the democratic opposition to the Stalinist Castro dictatorship of nearly 57 years. His almost indiscriminate railings against capitalism when he is in Latin America, dipping to scatology in reflections about "the devil's dung," are irritating and bad public policy, since economic growth is the only way to eradicate poverty. But a heavy application of Christian generosity can perhaps excuse his more provocative reflections because of his discomfort in navigating between the atheist Left in Latin America and the loss in membership his Church has suffered from the evangelical Christians, who are unencumbered by the baggage of complicity in the atrocities of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists and the cynical corruption of the post-Bolívar juntas right up to recent times. But the pope's apparent indifference to the virtues of human rights in Cuba, while visiting a decrepit and almost

Struldbrug despotism, one that needs him far more than he needs it, is a serious embarrassment to the Roman Catholic Church and a disappointment to all who wish success for this often inspiring pope.

The defeat of the far Left in Latin America can be reasonably assumed, as it has never succeeded anywhere and is anathema in what remains, Catholic and Protestant, a very Christian civilization. The collapse of the medium-hard Left seems likely to come in a democratic thunderclap in Brazil, and it is difficult to see where a far-Left regime has much likelihood of surviving in Latin America in five years, apart, perhaps, from Bolivia and one or two little countries in Central America. Opposite the evangelicals, Francis has made his apologies for his Church's complicity in odious regimes of the past, and Rome enjoys all the intellectual, material, organizational, and legitimist advantages it has generally deployed against schismatic Christian groups from the Counter-Reformation onward.

The missing player, here as now in many other parts of the world, is the United States. It is a reasonable assumption that, after possibly sharp corrective events, China's economic advance will continue; that India, under a distinctly social-capitalistic leader with a clear mandate (Narendra Modi), will emerge as a great economic power; and that, after some reconfiguration, Europe will persevere in the same course and on a formidable scale, possibly embracing great adjacent countries including Canada and Russia. Under any scenario, the United States should be expanding its economic hinterland to compete with these blocs of almost or over a billion people by exploiting these difficult times in Latin America positively, and beckoning to the whole region to join in a mutually respectful and productive economic association, such as that from which Mexico now benefits through North American Free Trade. In the process, it should get closer to Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, and other non-Chinese elements in the Far

East. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (including Chile, Mexico, and Peru), is a step in the right direction, and President Obama, whose foreign-policy successes are scarcer than four-leaf clovers, should be commended for it (if he can secure approval of it). But Latin America, a region of vast potential right under America's nose since James Monroe's time, gets little apparent attention beyond the vagaries of immigration. It is a very important strategic area awaiting unconscionably delayed recognition from post-Cold War America.

First published in