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INTER-AMERICAN SECURITY AND US MILITARY POLICY



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**INTER-AMERICAN SECURITY
AND US MILITARY POLICY**

by

Colonel Charles D. Corbett

24 June 1977

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FOREWORD

This memorandum was presented at the Military Policy Symposium sponsored by the Strategic Studies Institute and held at the US Army War College in early 1977. Under the general theme "Inter-American Security and the United States," a broad range of issues affecting US relations in the Latin American region were addressed. The author of this memorandum contends that the withering away of our once formidable bilateral military programs and agreements with the various Latin American countries is an understandable phenomenon of the times. He contends that, in the future, our primary policy emphasis should be directed toward multilateral approaches, with a view to maintaining our standing in the community, within resource levels that will be available.

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This memorandum is being published as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. The data and opinions presented are those of the author and in no way imply the endorsement of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.




DeWITT C. SMITH, JR.
Major General, USA
Commandant

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

COLONEL CHARLES D. CORBETT is the Commander, US Military Group, Guatemala. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia and holds a master's degree in Latin America area studies from The American University. Among Colonel Corbett's previous assignments are service as Chief, Western Hemisphere Division, Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; JCS Representative to the National Security Council Interdepartmental Group for Latin American Affairs and the Defense Department Panama Canal Treaty Working Group; and, Chairman, OSD/JCS Study Group on US Military Policy, Programs and Presence in Latin America. He is a graduate of the US Army War College and has had several articles on Latin American affairs published in professional journals.

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INTER-AMERICAN SECURITY AND US MILITARY POLICY

The defense of the western hemisphere was a major preoccupation of US military planners throughout the thirties. Indeed strategic planning in the War and Navy Departments was dominated by concerns for the security of the Panama Canal and denial of European colonial possessions in the Caribbean to unfriendly powers in the event of war. During the early phases of World War II, military strategy was centered on the series of Rainbow plans designed to thwart European inroads into the region. British resolve and French politics soon stymied the threat posed by the German and Vichy fleets, and the western hemisphere was relegated to the back bins of the military strategy shop, not forgotten but not worthy of the attention of those caught up in the exigencies of grand strategy or current crises. It has remained there ever since except for the dramatic days of October 1962, but even then the issues involved had much more to do with relations between the USSR and the United States than with inter-American security.

LATIN AMERICA AND US STRATEGY

Military policy for Latin America since and during World War II has

reflected Sumner Welles' grand design for political defenses that would deny access to our enemies and reward those hemisphere nations willing to accommodate to broader US objectives in the world. Environmental changes have prompted a variety of tactics and accompanying rationale but for 30 years there was a remarkable consistency of purpose in the use of military programs to maintain intact the political defenses.

Cold War apprehensions wed to justify the inclusion of Latin America as a Mutual Security Act grant aid recipient in 1951 despite the problem that military strategic planners had in formulating a credible threat to the hemisphere from a Russia or China with no blue water fleets. The Rio Pact of 1947, which multilateralized the Monroe Doctrine (and indorsed the status quo), proved to fit neatly into John Foster Dulles' network of regional defense agreements, and provision of surplus arms and a few contract advisors to countries of the region gave substance to the treaty and credibility in our own "strategic backyard" to Dulles' broader policies.

Perceptions of the threat and the rationale changed again in the early sixties. Castro was in power with a new doctrine of revolutionary warfare, Krushchev spoke chillingly of wars of national liberation and the Alliance for Progress accepted a measure of US responsibility for economic and social progress in Latin America. Military policymakers responded to the challenge of the activist Kennedy policy for Latin America by expanding the small existing military advisory structure and aid programs in the region, which had been modelled on forms and techniques employed in Greece and Korea during hot confrontations with the Communist world.

MILITARY PROGRAMS

The central instrumentalities of US bilateral military policy were mutual defense agreements fleshed out with advisory missions and assistance programs. As the Vietnam experience gave birth to a whole body of doctrine designed to defeat insurgency and use military organization and skills in "nation building" tasks, the military services applied the new doctrine universally and the rather austere military mission structure in Latin America blossomed into a unified combatant command (the Southern Command), controlling joint military group headquarters in 17 countries, most with separate army, navy and air sections. Some 738 US military personnel were assigned to these resident missions at their high point, and they administered annual grant aid programs that reached \$66 million.

This expanded "field" structure of the sixties was complemented by greater attention in Washington to hemisphere defense matters. A strong, regionally-oriented office was created in the Pentagon under a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) and corresponding offices under general officers were established in the Joint Chiefs of Staff organization and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Within the separate services, area specialists were assigned to deal with regional matters and annual conferences of US and Latin American army, navy and air force chiefs became routine. The US Navy had, and still has, the strongest service program with its "Operation UNITAS," an annual circumnavigation of South America in which antisubmarine warfare maneuvers are practiced with each Latin American navy.

The multilateral aspect was not overlooked. The Inter-American Defense Board, created during World War II to coordinate hemisphere defense and subsequently made an OAS planning agency for Rio Pact contingencies, was, and is, headed by a three star US officer and staffed with lesser ranks. As its chief appendage the Board operates a unique regional military educational institution, the Inter-American Defense College, headed by a US two star officer.

CHANGING ATTITUDES WITHIN THE US GOVERNMENT

So long as the Welles vision was shared, there was a rather remarkable and long-lived consensus with respect to these measures in the interdepartmental arena in Washington. In the fifties the State Department had provided the motivating force, bringing along a somewhat indifferent Pentagon. With the advent of the Kennedy administration and its activist policies, hard-headed military planners who normally counted closely every asset, nervously watching Europe, Korea and the festering situation in Indochina, found the old arguments for building political defenses in Latin America quite persuasive and willingly devoted what in retrospect appears to be a disproportionate amount of talent, time and considerable resources to the region, as outlined above.

The consensus broke down in the sixties in the broader arguments over the US role in the world. At State, apprehension was growing over the rather formidable military apparatus that had evolved. Che Guevara's dismal 1967 failure in Bolivia took the wind out of the only credible military threat, that of Cuba's announced determination to

export its revolution. Congressional resistance to providing the modern jets and tanks increasingly sought by Latin American military forces was growing. Many at State, and elsewhere in the administration, began to see the annual struggle with Congress over military aid to "military dictatorships" as counterproductive to gaining approval of other programs. Issues of trade and economics, not security, were coming to be viewed as the real underlying problems of US-Latin American policy. Cuba policy and the Canal Zone treaty were not yet front burner issues. Consequently, efforts by the State Department and its allies in other agencies to reduce substantially the US military apparatus in Latin America got underway in earnest in 1968.

The Pentagon has fought a delaying battle to maintain the structure in the 3 years since, but ground has been given steadily. Military strength in the missions and the unified command declined steadily and now is less than a third of what it was in 1966. The scare following Allende's election in Chile in 1970 brought a brief reprieve when the Nixon administration decided to mend its fences with conservative Latin military leaders by suspending further personnel reductions, but the steady erosion resumed a couple of years later.

Arms transfer programs also went into a sharp decline. The larger countries of South America were made ineligible for further grants of military equipment in 1968, and the warning went out to other countries that the grant program would soon have to end. The phaseout was predicated on the substitution of credit sales to allow the Latin American forces to continue to use the United States as their primary source of supply at concessionary terms. Unfortunately, the period coincided with the first major materiel acquisition cycle since World War II for most of the forces, and US policy, particularly as expressed in the Congress, was not amenable to supporting the scope and degree of modernization envisaged by the Latin Americans. Constraints and restrictions in the form of regional funding ceilings for credit, prohibitions on the sale of sophisticated weapons, and economic sanctions affecting arms transfers aggravated relations in an already strained transition period and there was a decided turn toward European suppliers on the part of the Latin Americans.

Reflecting the reduced programs and field structure, the Latin America oriented offices in Defense and the JCS were reduced in strength and combined with other offices.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE AS A POLICY TOOL

Interestingly, in contrast with other areas of the world, in the

western hemisphere arms transfers have not been employed primarily as a *quid pro quo* for base or operating rights. Arms have been provided mainly to the continental states, whereas our bases are located and operating rights exercised largely in island countries of the Caribbean. Panama, where we have the biggest stake, until recently received no more military aid than Paraguay or Uruguay, where we have none. Transfers in recent years have been used primarily to strengthen political defenses. However, the grant program for Latin America has been terminated recently.

Similarly, the continuing presence of military missions is justified principally in terms of maintaining influence with a rather unique regional political elite who guide or control the destinies of many countries. Ambassadors have tended to support that rationale, but Washington level officials tend to discount its value and effect, holding that the military *qua* government or political party has interests and concerns that far transcend the rather narrow professional area of advice and cooperation for which military missions are suited.

Even in the latter area our military missions have found a declining need for and receptivity to their advisory activities in recent years. In Bolivia, Uruguay, Guatemala, Colombia and Venezuela, the very success of the counterinsurgency efforts has left the Armed Forces more independent and self-confident, and less inclined to look to the United States for the type of advice that was welcome in the sixties.

The inflow of European and Soviet arms has loosened Latin American ties to us in many ways. The purchase and integration of major weapons systems, even in relatively limited quantities, is an event in the small Latin American armed forces that demands the time and attention of a great part of the hierarchy, and our contacts and relationships have suffered therefrom.

Throughout the hemisphere, a generation of officers who have close ties with the US military—forged during and after World War II—are giving way to new faces whose opinions and attitudes have been formed under different circumstances.

Everywhere, increasing professionalism reinforces nationalism as a force for greater independence from both foreign tutelage and involuntary involvement in great power concerns. In its most flattering light, this could be seen as the fruit of our training and advisory programs over the years, and certainly our efforts deserve some credit. However, military institutions, like others, mature and our contribution probably has been only incremental.

GEOFOLITICAL TRENDS

Broader geopolitical trends of the recent past also bring into sharp question the validity and relevance to current US defense interests of the programs that make up what we here have called military policy. Among the more salient factors:

- The United States has committed itself to seek a modernized treaty with Panama that would recognize Panama's sovereignty and ultimate right to full control over the Canal. In the interim, Panama would participate with the United States in the operations and defense of the waterway.

- Cuba's growing attraction as a market has eroded the long-standing OAS trade embargo against the island, and the failure of Castro successfully to export his revolution at the height of its fervor has generally removed that fear as a catalyst for collective security efforts against it. (The truly formidable success Cuba achieved in employing a large expeditionary force in Africa has caused renewed uneasiness in Central America, but it is a mark of the enduring qualities of the Monroe Doctrine that no Latin American nation seriously believes the United States would countenance such an overt operation in the Western hemisphere).

- Peru definitively broke the Western monopoly on arms supply to Latin America by contracting with the Soviet Union for modern armor, aircraft and associated equipment.

- Growing differentials in relative power among the Latin American nations have rendered obsolete the previously accurate US military strategic view of Latin America as a homogeneous grouping of nation states equally impotent in terms of military capabilities. All of the military establishments have matured greatly over the past 20 years in terms of professionalism and capabilities, but some have naturally moved much farther than others. This trend is both cause and effect to another.

- Latin America is increasingly subject to international "intramural" strife as national integration movements give nation states the wherewithal, political will and capability to renew old feuds or respond to new threats or opportunities. For decades, the power differentials (actual not potential) between equally impotent states contributed to a remarkably peaceful region in terms of international strife. The change and the rate of change in that situation is dizzying. The classical *casus belli* have been present but dormant; i.e., territorial disputes, great

differentials in population density in contiguous border areas, ideological concerns. They are no longer dormant, and the dangers of international conflict in our "strategic backyard" are not theoretical.

• Military governments have come to power in Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, leaving only Surinam, Guyana, Venezuela and Colombia on the South American continent with elected regimes that are respectable to a dominant sector of US public opinion. The determination and zeal of military governments to stamp out persistent leftist terrorism and guerrilla activity have brought their policies into probably inevitable conflicts with deeply felt sentiments over human rights, not only in the United States but in much of the Western world.

REASSESSING

If the military policies that have been in effect since World War II have such obviously declining value and support, what should be done to revise them? Indeed, since the military security component of our Latin American policy has become so overshadowed by issues of trade, finance and economics, do we need to concern ourselves with a "military policy" beyond that included in our unilateral plans?

Certainly we must act both bilaterally and multilaterally to protect and maintain the base and facility structure as long as it retains its usefulness. The structure is entirely in the Caribbean area and is designed to protect continental approaches and the Panama Canal, to facilitate antisubmarine operations and to provide naval training and research facilities. It includes base, facility, access or operating rights in Cuba, Panama, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Antigua, Barbados, and the UK Turks and Caico Islands.

Elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean our military security interests have not been distinguishable from the political goal of maintaining friendly governments in power. The interventions in Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965 attest to the importance attached to that goal by Republican and Democratic administrations, and military programs for countries of the subregion have been aimed largely at supporting it.

In South America our interests reached a zenith in World War II when control of the South Atlantic Narrows and the staging advantages of the Brazilian hump prompted a close alliance with Brazil. In Brazil, the Communications Technical Group (Radio Rio), no longer retained by the United States, is a heritage of our wartime alliance and is now a

Brazilian Navy activity with USN participation. Thus base rights is not a pressing issue outside the Caribbean.

In terms of broader military strategy, Latin America, as it has since 1942, lies outside the geopolitical area of major concern. None of the countries, except perhaps Brazil, is considered by strategists to have the capability to contribute in any important way to the aggregation of the Western world's combat power which US military planners characterize as the "Total Force" policy. There is a perennial discussion of Brazil's future capabilities and willingness to take on a role, and certainly such a contribution would be welcome in the South Atlantic Narrows in any general war scenario. The tempting promise of force accretions or trade offs from that quarter are somewhat tempered by the political problems associated with the human rights issue, however, as military planners learned over the years in dealing with Spain and NATO.

In any military analysis the Canal and Cuba remain the twin foci of military security concern in the region. Unsurprisingly they also are the touchiest political issues that the new administration will have to face in its overall foreign policy for Latin America. Agreement with Panama on a new treaty based on the "negotiating principles" approved by both governments in 1974 will go far toward relegating the Canal to the same back bin of the strategy shop occupied by other regional military issues. There has long been tacit recognition of the fact that the primary threat to Canal operations short of general war came from disgruntled Panamanians. The general war scenario will no doubt require the maintenance of some parts of the existing Caribbean base structure for control of the approaches to the Canal.

Although military concerns with Cuba fall chiefly in the area of Soviet affairs, the capabilities exhibited in Angola have again raised some fears of Cuban military adventurism in the hemisphere that may or may not have the full blessing of its principal military supplier and mentor. Likewise the Guantanamo navy base issue, now dormant, is not likely to remain quiescent for long after a Panama Canal treaty is signed.

Among the traditional military programs in our foreign policy, none would appear to have much utility in furthering our interests in the case of Cuba. Continued and even increased military aid to Panama should be a major component of the treaty process, both as a *quid pro quo* for US rights and to insure that the National Guard of Panama has the capability to make a real contribution to Canal defense. Military assistance of the traditional type is also indicated where appropriate in negotiating for rights with the island states.

Elsewhere in the hemisphere it is going to be difficult to rationalize a turnaround in the current trend toward phasing out the grant aid military programs and advisory missions that have supported our many bilateral defense agreements. One exception may be, should be, the recently renamed International Military Education and Training program, which provides about \$10 million a year in grants for the continued training of Latin American military men in US schools. No clairvoyance is required to predict even rougher sailing ahead for arms transfers under cash or credit sales programs as the domestic political trends in the hemisphere clash with US sensitivities over human rights.

THE FUTURE

The times call for a new way of thinking about the military component of our relations with Latin America. To doggedly hold on to policies of the past, trying to maintain the form of our extensive command and mission structure without the substance, would be wasteful of resources and could become counterproductive to our larger objectives.

On the other hand our bilateral programs have left us a valuable legacy, a formidable skein of north-south ties that more nearly approximates a military community than is found anywhere else except perhaps NATO. There is a wide acquaintanceship among leaders and lesser ranks, a common base of doctrine and a great similarity in basic equipment. These are advantages to be nourished in an uncertain world.

How best to do so? Certainly the obvious approach is to build on the multilateral institutions, practices and traditions that have grown up under the umbrella of the Rio Treaty. As previously mentioned, that apparatus is already respectable, and includes the Inter-American Defense Board and College, regular meetings of Army, Navy and Air Force commanders and many conferences of specialists in communications, military medicine, etc., and operation UNITAS.

Even though some of the institutions (i.e., the Board) are structured in such a way to make decisive action difficult, that need not be a fatal disability. The system would easily accommodate, for example, an occasional conference of defense ministers. Such a meeting would serve as a superb politico-military sounding board for security concerns around the hemisphere and as a forum to encourage what must be the motivating force for collective security in the years ahead: not a Cold War type alliance directed exclusively against the Soviet Union, but a

collective security arrangement that will serve to promote peace in a hemisphere increasingly subject to intramural strife, strife from which the United States will not be able to stay aloof, and in which unilateral efforts would be faced with great risks. A conference of defense ministers would also mitigate the already noticeable uneasiness over current policy trends among Latin American military and political leaders. Among the causes of this uneasiness are not only the reduction in bilateral programs but also a sentiment that legitimate inter-American security concerns are being ignored as detente and SALT monopolize US attention.

There are other potential and very tangible benefits that could accrue to a revitalized collective security system. A post-treaty US role in defense of the Panama Canal, for example, may be achievable in no other context. A reduction of the Soviet presence in Cuba could be a long range payoff. And hopefully, with imaginative leadership, the system could provide enough of a sense of security to slow the acquisition of arms throughout the hemisphere. In Central America, for example, there is good reason to believe that leaders would welcome a strong restatement of the nonaggression clauses of the Rio treaty to underwrite their efforts to keep a mini arms race under control. Leadership of the United States and, say, Venezuela in such a move would give it substance and credibility.

The challenge to US leadership is to define the true security issues that face the hemisphere in these times and to assist in their resolution by using the limited resources warranted by US military interests in the region to promote and encourage a collective response. The thesis of this paper is that the withering away of our once formidable bilateral military programs and agreements with the various Latin American countries is an understandable phenomenon of the times that need not signal the disappearance or loss as a valuable asset of US foreign policy of the remarkable military community that has developed in the western hemisphere. In simplified terms, our primary policy emphasis should be directed toward multilateral approaches in the future with a view to maintaining our standing in the community within resource levels that will be available.

The multilateral approach recommended here is open to the obvious charges that it relies heavily on style and form rather than substance (read US resources), and that unilateral US security objectives will be more difficult to realize than would be the case with bilateral programs. Both are valid arguments but given the environment in which the

strategic planner operates today, and the rather limited range of military interests at stake, the real possibilities of continued significant resource commitments is questionable. The resource issue was perfectly outlined by a War Department planner in the hectic days of 1942.

“Do we want to embark seriously upon a program of raising the military efficiency of LA forces to a point where they would be of material aid to us as allies in hemisphere defense? or, alternatively, shall we limit our efforts to obtaining the indirect results which would follow a better mutual understanding?”

The policy response in 1942 was some of both but with emphasis on the latter. It is not a bad response today.

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