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The current penchant, in the press and academia, for comparing El Salvador with Vietnam should not obscure the fact that far more pertinent precedents for U.S. involvement in Latin America are available. Despite similarities among self-imposed tests of strength, will, and anti-insurgency warfare tactics in peasant societies, the El Salvador experience is best viewed in connection with other Western Hemisphere involvements, and one need not go back as far as Teddy Roosevelt to find the most instructive examples.

El Salvador fits a pattern of political violence in nominally independent Latin states emerging from years of repressive dictatorship. This pattern resembles the anti-colonial struggles of Vietnam only in terms of basic land-lord-peasant conflict, and the role of an outside major power propping up the privileged or "modern" classes. And just as one would have learned more comparing U.S. intervention in Vietnam to Korean, Laotian, and Philippine examples (or to the French Indo-China experience), than to Munich, so one learns most by comparing the El Salvador involvement to direct and indirect U.S. interventions in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Chile, and Nicaragua.

As the columnist William Pfaff has noted, the basic similarity of Vietnam and Salvadoran involvements is an expressed and inaccurate belief in Washington that outside rather than indigenous forces were responsible for these uprisings.

If one must look far afield for historical analogies, more is gained by reviewing the experience in Iran when oligarchy collapsed than in Vietnam.

In one other sense, though, Vietnam fits the mold of the Latin interventions mentioned above. Military oligarchy came to South Vietnam partly as a result of a failed search by U.S. officials for a viable nationalist leader who would represent moderate forces and counter Communist appeal. While the situation in Vietnam was different in important ways from El Salvador, the political priorities and machinations of those in Washington were similar. The Truman Administration had urged reforms leading to Vietnamese autonomy on the French during the period of recolonization following World War II, and when the "Emperor" Bao Dai failed to establish a viable and popular non-Communist government following the French withdrawal, the U.S. turned to Ngo Dinh Diem, and subsequently a parade of generals in successive juntas. Inevitably Washington applied pressure to validate juntas through elections.

The pattern has been repeated elsewhere, including San Salvador with Washington's support for President Duarte. The basic dilemma for superpowers trying to control political contests in dependent states is finding a viable faction to back. Rather than coming to terms with forces of radical change in Third World societies, or opting to let indigenous forces "have it out," and seeing the futility of supporting certain forces of reaction once popular rebellion has been unleashed, American leaders have come, usually belatedly, to the idea of

supporting the center. By the time this realization occurs, it is often too late, and radical forces of left and right compete to sweep away all opponents, including those in the middle.

As seen below, U.S. policy in Latin American disputes has followed recurring patterns, and the very fact of such predictability suggests a certain lack of flexibility and innovative diplomacy in approaching the region. It also suggests that Washington is often two steps behind the trends of breaking events, and woefully unperceptive about the issues at stake.

The Intervention Game

The reasons for major powers' decisions to intervene in civil disputes in the Third World, and the rate of success of such interventions can vary by region. Intervention options include use of the superpower's own forces, support for military intervention by others, intervention through covert subversion or aid, or simply grants or refusals of diplomatic support for factions in disputes. In part, decisions about which if any option to choose rest on leaders' perceptions of the stakes involved in such disputes, the logistics of entering the dispute (regional geography), the perceived role of other major powers or key regional actors, the reactions of allies and other important actors at home and abroad, and the psychology of international gamesmanship. The last factor refers to major powers' need to be and appear powerful -- the dictum that to be a power one must exercise power. When leaders operate from

the latter motivation, their intervention decisions may have remarkably little to do with the 'objective' situation where they intervene, and more to do with the recent box-score (self-defined) of wins and losses in world power competition. They may be drawn into disputes for fear that allies or enemies would consider non-intervention a sign of weakness.

The outcomes of such interventions also depend on regional circumstances, and on the success criteria applied. If the power merely tries to buy time, to avoid the total collapse of a favored government for example, depending upon logistics and the degree of opponents' organization, it might hold on for years, perhaps with its own troops in occupation. If the goal is the establishment of a popular and "stable" government, then military means may be inappropriate, and the outcome might depend upon seizing diplomatic initiative at the right moment to bring about a coalition of factions.

Looking at one listing of nine American overt and covert military interventions since 1950,[1] for example, four of which were in Latin America, we find that two (Cuba - Bay of Pigs and Vietnam) were unqualified failures as measured by installation and survival of a favored government, one more (Iran) a failure after a "decent interval" of success, one (Lebanon) a brief success, and ultimate disastrous failure, neither of which had much to do with U.S. efforts, two (Guatemala and Zaire) successful despite serious recurring rebellions, one (Korea) a stalemated success, and two outright successes (Chile and the Dominican Republic), with only the latter success resembling a democracy. One of the "successes," Guatemala, in particular

has seen a shifting of personalities in ruling juntas, extremely bloody civil violence, corrupt elections, and an ongoing rebellion.

The cost of the five qualified successes and four failures has to be tallied in terms of American and other nationals' lives lost, and the respective diplomatic and economic hardships generated. It is for those in power in Washington, and those periodically voting for them, to take stock of this record and determine whether intervention has been worth the candle. It seems quite clear, however, that the complexities of regional and local political disputes have not lent themselves particularly well to outside manipulation by major powers in the post-colonial and post-1945 era.

The Latin Beat

The characteristic pattern of major power intervention varies by region. Some regions are hotly contested between two or more powers (the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa -- with the latter reaching new competitive prominence in the late 1970's), while others are treated as clearly defined spheres of major power influence (Latin America, Western and Eastern Europe). In the Middle East, for example, superpowers have intervened mainly in the context of the Arab-Israeli dispute, and in recent years in local insurgencies or border wars (Yemen, Iran-Iraq) to preserve favored regimes threatened by regional opponents, and less frequently, by domestic opponents.[2] In Latin America and Eastern Europe, by contrast, the dominant power has intervened to preserve a security belt of ideologically acceptable states. Some regions, most notably the Middle East,

have been remarkably resistant to major power control and penetration, with states compelling and expelling superpower patrons (Nasser-Sadat-USSR), forcing superpowers to accept regional initiatives (Begin-Sadat rapprochement), and foiling superpower plans for regional alliance (Nasser-CENTO; Saudis-Reagan). Other regions, such as Central America, have been much more clearly under the sway of a dominant state.

U.S. interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, since World War II, generally have been triggered by perceived openings to the Soviet Union, and more recently Cuba. As Krasner noted, these perceptions have seldom been very accurate (witness the unsubstantiated and mistaken claims about the number of Communists in Santo Domingo in 1965), but rather indicate an emotional determination to prevent what are seen as advantages for rival powers. As in the protracted debate on the future of the Panama Canal, there is also a recurring concern that if the U.S. cannot stand up to "two-bit" powers in its own back yard, where in the world can it hope to be powerful or impress "friends and foes alike?" Fidel Castro has had an unusual and continuous hold on North American political emotions. The facts of Castro's overtures for improved relations and the developing modus vivendi of the mid-to late-1970's have done little to moderate the volatility of the Cuban revolution in U.S. politics,[3] evidenced in episodes such as the "Cuban Brigade discovery" of 1980.

Washington has intervened basically in two types of Latin American situations: (1) where an existing government has overstepped the bounds of U.S. tolerance through dealings with

Communist states or through radical reforms at home (e.g. Chile, Guatemala); and (2) where a traditional oligarchy breaks down and radical forces contend for power (e.g. Cuba, Dominican Republic). In the first instance the excesses of political leaders in Latin America and in Washington contributed to the interventionist response. In attempting to satisfy his constituents, President Allende of Chile went further in foreign policy gestures than he might, attracting more interest from Mr. Kissinger than even Harold Geneen of I.T.T. could have generated through private contacts. If such excesses occur when Washington is also suffering political excesses -- for example in the wake of setbacks in places like Vietnam, Iran, or Poland -- the temptation to intervention can be irresistable. Leaders of small countries operating within traditional major power spheres of influence must be extremely adept at carrying out policy reforms without drawing the suspicion of the dominant power.

In the situation where the traditional Latin oligarchy crumbles but no new government has yet emerged as replacement, Washington has generally sought and achieved near colonial levels of involvement. During serious civil disputes in traditional American dependencies, as in Santo Domingo, 1965, the U.S. ambassador has come to play the colonial governor's role (this was also the case in Vietnam, if we remember Ambassador Lodge's role in the downfall of President Diem), involved in king-making and daily consultation with army and political factions.[4]

While an opinionated and ambitious ambassador can profoundly influence Washington's perceptions of fast breaking events and success probabilities for various initiatives, the political priorities guiding U.S. involvements and manipulative attempts come from the top. Indeed, former ambassadors have recently been quite free with their criticism of the last two administrations' failures to heed sufficiently their warnings and suggestions in crises ranging from Iran to El Salvador. Successive administrations have been guided implicitly in their dealings with Latin America and other regions by the triumvarite of basic priorities John Kennedy so clearly enunciated, when dealing with the Cheddy Jagan phenomenon.[5] Kennedy indicated he would always prefer a democratic government in a vital Third World state, but would settle for a rightist dictator if it meant effectively precluding radical or Communist control. This ordering of values -- democrat before dictator before Communist -- in rough form and with imprecise definitions -- continues to apply. For Kennedy, in his Alliance for Progress initiatives, the ideal leader was the moderate reforming democrat -- the Romulo Betancourts and Eduardo Freis of the hemisphere. Rightist military leaders were only a second best alternative, yet one readily embraced where radicals lurked. The military junta had far less chance than the democrat of gaining wide popular support through economic reform. Mass based democracy and economic progress would offer the best hopes of undercutting Communist, and for Kennedy and all presidents since, particularly Castroite appeal.

While Washington's idea of a Latin utopia would look something like Venezuela or Costa Rica, the unfortunate reality has been that these bastions of middle class democracy are few

and far between. Instead the archetypal Central American and Caribbean state has suffered approximately thirty years of caudillo strongman rule, with rampant family based corruption, a power base largely resting upon U.S.-trained and equipped military forces, close economic connections to a large North American fruit, sugar, oil, mining, or coffee company, havens for North American organized crime, vast and ostentatious gaps of wealth between the elite rich and peasant and urban masses, a strong and yet somewhat politically critical Church, and a tenuous alliance of liberal middle class (lawyer, publisher, teacher, merchant), rural and urban leftists, and clergy against the regime. When the regime crumbles, for reasons of gross misconduct, ineptitude, or simply age, the opposition may or may not hold together, and the U.S. invariably poses for itself a "crucial choice" about what to do and whom to support.

While Washington has generally been interested in stability and control, it has not inevitably supported the oligarchy to the bitter end. The more typical U.S. response has been a confused stagger between political and military factions looking for the center, or failing that a popular new strongman. A classic and ironic example is the Dominican Republic. The Eisenhower Administration had determined by 1960 that Rafael Trujillo and his family had to go. Trujillo had exceeded even the limits of North American tolerance with his plans to assassinate President Betancourt. Eisenhower also had become disillusioned with Cuba's Batista, and had withheld aid, but went even further in the Dominican case. The CIA was unleashed to help unseat a ruling conservative autocrat, and the US Consul

General assigned to contact opposition groups in 1960.[6] For the succeeding Kennedy and Johnson administrations, with the value rankings outlined above, the question became how to prevent radicals from seizing the opportunity, how to produce the non-Communist rabbit from the middle class hat. The next four years were spent searching for the solution, first hopefully in a coalition council, then in the elected Socialist Juan Bosch, then in accepting the Dominican army's coup and condemning Bosch oddly as both ineffective and a Communist dupe. Finally a U.S. and then O.A.S. military intervention produced an elected government, one that has lasted 17 years, and which has remained favorable to but not altogether uncritical of U.S. interests and hemispheric policies.

The situation in the Dominican Republic was not identical to those of Nicaragua and El Salvador, but the U.S. approach has been quite similar, although the marines have not yet been sent. In terms of tactics, in fact, the Guatemalan precedent of 1954 and the reaction to the newest Guatemalan junta are pertinent as well. U.S. involvements in both aiding and occasionally urging reforms on the Somoza regime in Nicaragua are relatively well known. In El Salvador there was a tradition of less intense U.S. involvement and concern, although with the Alliance for Progress, support was given to successive military juntas which seemed to promise slow reform and modernization, as well as counter-insurgency diligence. Few reforms in either state reached the countryside or addressed the land tenure question; and U.S policies toward labour unions

in Central America were strongly conditioned by the anti-Communist crusades of the AFL-CIO. In fact it has been argued that the record of U.S. support for right wing officers in El Salvador, and suspicions of Napoleon Duarte in the early 1970's significantly weakened centrists in El Salvador, setting the stage for today's frantic search for the vanishing middle group there.[7] American policy, conceived basically to line up reliable clients and to promote hemispheric security, has generally been ten years behind the pace of local reform demanded by opposition groups.

In trying to keep up with the pace of coups, counter-coups, and rebellions, American diplomacy has staggered between factions in a characteristic pattern. In Nicaragua the Carter Administration finally became reconciled to the ouster of Somoza, but again reflecting fundamental aversion to the left, sought an alternative in the moderate middle to preclude Sandanista rule. When, because of the peculiarities of Nicaragua and the tardiness of U.S.-inspired reforms, no viable middle force could be found, Carter tried to come to terms with the Sandanistas and promote a coalition government. Concessions were achieved along these lines, but basic and unnecessary hostility had been generated.

Because of basic, if belated preference for the center, various administrations have failed to distinguish carefully between situations, like that of the Dominican Republic, where the moderate left and middle classes both offered some hope of non-radical government, and where the far left was basically

weak, and cases where the radical left is too well organized and entrenched in the countryside to be excluded, represents the best chance for stable government, and is strengthened rather than weakened by U.S.-backed intervention. Apart from the crescendo of accusations about "Communist" infiltration and intervention, the Reagan Administration's approach to the sorry task of building a government in El Salvador is exceedingly familiar. As one former diplomat assigned there has been quoted in the press:

> It's intriguing, everybody detests the Christian Democrats, yet they are the only group that behaves themselves in ways we can stand. They're absolutely loathed, even though they are reasonable, they don't kill, and they don't foam at the mouth.[8]

Publicly and diplomatically the U.S. has once again grasped at a centrist solution, in a situation that seems to have deteriorated to where the only thing left and right can agree upon is the need to eliminate the middle.

Yet there is and has always been more to U.S. policy in Latin America than wholehearted support for democrats and reformers. It is thought necessary to find such leaders in order to give a government respectability abroad and among its own population; yet the ultimate means of continued U.S. influence in these states has been through the military. The sprinkling of centrists into a military junta is now evident in Guatemala, where the nominal leader, General Efraim Rios Montt, had run for president in 1974 as a Christian Democrat. Ironically, backing the same junta is Sr. Leonel Sisniega of the far right Movement for National Liberation.[9] Centrists were linked to the

Salvadoran junta through Duarte as well. The military represents the last bastion of hope against well armed leftist insurgents; when the center collapses it is the military which often on its own initiative and sometimes in consultation with the U.S. steps in to displace civilian authorities, the military which is willing to cooperate in anti-insurgency campaigns across neighbors' borders. Hence the ongoing close relationship between North, Central, and South American military commands expressed in U.S. military training programs (currently IMET); U.S. civilian leaders have concluded that it is best to be on good terms with Latin American military leaders if and when they emerge as strongmen, and to be aware of their potential emergence ahead of time.

The result of a twenty year old U.S. policy of building Latin military forces, and trying to season them with centrists where necessary, seems to be a growing whirlwind of violence in the region. A former director of U.S. counter-insurgency and defense planning linked the bloodbath killings of El Salvador (25,000 people), Guatemala, Argentina, and other U.S. Latin allies to Washington's gradual emphasis on internal security as a means to hemispheric defense, rather than on external defense <u>per se</u>.

> Under the guise of "civil action" programs, Latin American officers have been encouraged to meddle in government and civilian affairs. There has been little screening to weed out the drug racketeers and war criminals, and no introduction in civilized standards of warfare.[10]

While guerrillas are responsible for some of the killings and kidnappings, according to a variety of international agencies,

the bulk are committed by military or para-military security squads or uncontrolled offshoots of such forces. Furthermore, under U.S. administrations going back to Eisenhower (Guatemala), and particularly under the current one, para-military, mercenary, and exile forces are trained in the U.S. and Central America and openly referred to as one of the options available to "discipline" the likes of Cuba and Nicaragua. With one technical success and one glaring failure in the past use of such options, and with a recurring penchant to brag about their availability for diplomatic advantage, one can hardly be sanguine that anything more will be achieved through such forces than additions to the staggering Latin death toll.

The Reagan Administration seems to have determined to undermine leftist regimes or produce anti-left regimes in the region <u>indirectly</u>, without the use of U.S. combat forces at least for the moment. This is due to three sets of factors: (1) the continued controversial nature of Yankee intervention in Latin America; (2) the evident success of means such as economic isolation and CIA destabilization of the Allende government; and (3) nagging doubts that any viable non-Communist government can be found among Salvadorian civilian or military leaders. Direct U.S. military intervention remains for the moment politically difficult at home, with memories of Vietnam, and disruptive in hemispheric relations. It is even problematic for Argentina to take too open a role as a U.S. surrogate, intervening in a fellow Latin state. In addition, there are indications that intelligence reports have been sufficiently pessimistic to produce second thoughts in Washington

about billing El Salvador as a test case of anti-insurgency warfare or a show-down with the Cubans. Economic disruption may also fail in the Nicaraguan case, as the government in Managua heeds Fidel Castro's advice and cultivates the private sector while maintaining businesslike relations and an open invitation to negotiate outstanding issues with the U.S.

Where there is little hope of popular right or center governments the U.S. often persists publicly in the center and quietly by aiding the military. President Carter suspended aid to the Duarte government because of the killings of nuns and other excesses; yet when confronted with the reality of leftist strength, and Salvadoran government excuses about an uncontrollable army, he ordered aid resumed. There was no evident non-leftist alternative. The Reagan Administration also speaks of the Salvadoran middle ground. When interviewed on BBC radio on March 1982, the State Department's Human Rights Bureau Chief highlighted the need to back the faction <u>most likely</u> to move toward respect for human rights. This was supposedly the reason for continued support of Duarte despite the abysmal human rights record of his army, and the negligible prospect of elections resulting in broader popular support for his government. After that election produced gains for the right, U.S. officials evidently pressured for inclusion of at least some Christian Democrats, or "independents" in any coalition.

The Need for a Reordering

While certain favored regimes have been kept in power for extended periods through both direct and indirect U.S. intervention in Latin America, the record of regional terror and killings, and the strengthening of radical opposition to U.S. "imperialism" should give pause even to those who believe that intervention has paid off. As in Soviet suppression of change in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, the intervening major power clings to the status-quo and a tenuous grip on client states. In the process it resorts to ludicrous rationales, such as the "Brezhnev doctrine," or the contrived "White Paper" on El Salvador of February 23, 1981. The intervening power can lose all sense of proportion, judgement about public opinion, and credibility abroad. Whether or not the country in question is vitally important to the power's security, it is portrayed and ultimately treated as crucial. Reconsideration of commitments is rare.

Yet diplomacy is the art of extrication as well as involvement, and a subtle art as well. It consists in distinguishing the important from the unimportant, recognizing winable from unwinable conflicts, and judging the amount of good or damage an ongoing policy produces. U.S. policy in Latin America has for over twenty years been frozen along the lines of the Kennedy value ordering noted above. In the midst of increasing regional disorder and pressures for radical change, the time has come to consider reordering the priorities. With little gained and many lives lost during the twenty year experiment in anti-insurgency internal security, it could be that a policy which prefers democrats and supports them early, but which countenances forces of radical change

in preference to military oligarchies would produce more stability and no less cooperation in the region. This does not mean a campaign to overthrow military regimes, but a willingness to establish genuinely business-like relations with even leftist regimes. Furthermore, it implies a willingness to supply economic and even military assistance to leftist regimes provided they refrain from mass arrests, government sponsored killings, and military attacks on neighbors. Arguably, such assistance provided early to the Castro government would have precluded much of the need for Cuba's near total economic dependence upon the USSR.

Yet normal diplomatic, economic, and military relations with governments is no guarantee of agreement on all issues, or that they will have no dealings with opponents of the U.S., or that they will deal kindly with their ideological opponents at home. It is only a way of maintaining influence with such states while allowing social change which might lessen future resentment of the U.S. and the appeal of Soviet assistance.

The first value -- preference for democracy -- could be furthered by seizing the opportunity presented by current Central American disputes. Mexico and Venezuela have both come forward to play active mediatory roles, and in conjunction with Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic represent an OAS faction of democratic states with unique qualifications to promote political settlements in the region. The time to consider and persist in multilateral diplomacy is early in regional disputes, rather than when U.S. marines, or even "advisors,"

are being shot at from street corners in hostile Latin capitals.

One other perspective is necessary if the U.S. government is to be more circumspect about its regional involvements: an appreciation of the fluid nature of politics in countries emerging from dictatorial rule. The Spanish experience -- the recent trials of would-be junta leaders, the Basque resistance, the roles of Church and the Left -- are important indicators of the kinds of disputes that can erupt in post-oligarchical societies. Trying to find the middle ground and stability in such states through outside engineering can be futile and can increase militant opposition. Modesty is called for; aid can be given, but depending upon local traditions, democracy may be neither meaningful nor feasible. It is probably best to refrain from gratuitous provocative acts of public diplomacy, such as inviting a deposed strongman to seek refuge or medical treatment in the U.S. Cases are best evaluated individually and in their regional context. It is important to judge the level and type of involvement that would do the most to promote long-run cooperation between the U.S. and the government most likely to emerge, as well as minimize government sponsored terror of the right and left, and promote U.S. cooperation with the most important and democratic regional actors. In general, abstention would be called for where the best organized, and most popular forces are not clearly indentifiable or are unlikely initially to be cooperative.

Once a government is established, prudence dictates efforts to forge normal diplomatic relations, and refrain, except under gross provocation, from efforts to destabilize it. That such precepts could be controversial only illustrates how far U.S. policy in Latin America has strayed from the traditions and principles of international diplomacy; that the region is a traditional sphere of influence need not condemn the states in that region to continuous major power intervention.

FOOTNOTES

1. Stephen D. Krasner, Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 276. The judgements about success or failure are made for this study and are not necessarily Krasner's.

2. See Yair Evron, "Great Powers' Military Intervention in the Middle East," in Great Power Intervention in the Middle East, ed. by Milton Leitenberg and Gabriel Sheffer (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979) Ch. 1.

3. See Martin Weinstein, ed., Revolutionary Cuba in the World Arena (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979).

4. See John Bartlow Martin, U.S. Policy in the Caribbean, (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1978); and Overtaken by Events: The Dominican Crisis from the Fall of Trujillo to the Civil War (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

5. Melvin Gurtov, The United States Against the Third World: Antinationalism and Intervention (New York: Praeger, 1974); and Richard Barnet, Intervention and Revolution: The United States in the Third World (London: Paladin Press, 1972)

6. Krasner, op. cit.

7. See Jenny Pearce, Under the Eagle, (London: Latin American Bureau, 1981), Part 5.

8. Warren Hoge, "El Salvador Left and Right United in Loathing of Christian Democrats," International Herald Tribune, (March 23, 1982), p. 5.

9. Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "The Coup's Contradictions," Financial Times, (London), (March 25, 1982), p. 4.

10. Charles Maechling Jr., "Official Terror is the Latin Custom," International Herald Tribune, (March 23, 1982), p. 4.