

The UNITED STATES and LATIN AMERICA...



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a Political-Military Appraisal

By Dr. Maurice J. Mountain

RECENT events in the Dominican Republic have led to renewed public interest in and discussion of Latin American politico-military affairs and the extent of US involvement in them. To judge by some of the criticisms levelled at the United States in the past few weeks, public discussion could be much improved if, first, current US actions were placed in proper historical perspective; second, the problems confronting us in Latin America were clearly recognized and, third, the unique role of military forces in Latin America generally were more fully understood.

On the matter of perspective the special concern of the United States is by no means of recent origin. In 1823 President Monroe wrote: "With the movements in this hemisphere we are of necessity more immediately connected, and by causes which must be obvious to all enlightened observers." In 1965 these words are, if anything, even more applicable.

The US political interest in Latin America has

four main roots. Most obvious and oldest is the military one which springs from the geographical proximity of Latin America to the continental United States, from the importance of the Panama Canal as a traffic artery and, particularly during the World War II period, from the strategic raw materials which the area can supply. Second is the fraternal bond established by the fact that each of the Latin American republics achieved its independence, as did the United States by a successful revolution against a European king, and that the ideals of the American and French Revolutions provided the intellectual and philosophical basis for their actions. Third and somewhat younger is the economic root whose central fiber is the nine billion dollars of private US investment in the area today and the related fact that US trade with Latin America is nearly seven billion dollars annually. Fourth, and newest is the diplomatic root which arises out of the fact that, in an age of collective action and inter-

US AND LATIN AMERICA

national organization, Latin America with its 19 voices and 19 votes represents a significant bloc in world forums.

These four primary concerns have been reflected in US policies which over the years have sought as far as possible (1) to deny a military foothold in this hemisphere to outside powers, (2) to promote stable democratic regimes, (3) to protect US investments and foster trade with the US, and (4) to gain widespread diplomatic support among Latin American governments for US proposals and actions.

Within this broad framework specific US policies, some as old as the Monroe Doctrine, others as recent as the Alliance for Progress, have been developed as the situation of the time presented threats to one or more of the basic elements—military, fraternal, economic or diplomatic—which constitute the US political interest in Latin America.

The Current Problem

The greatest current threats to US interests—military, economic and diplomatic—in Latin America are the internal disorder and political instability arising out of the social upheaval now underway in the area and the opportunities these conditions present for exploitation by communist and other elements hostile to the United States. Cuba has provided one example, and the Dominican Republic very nearly provided another. In attempting to devise policies to meet this threat, however, the United States finds itself faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, it must try to promote political stability, while on the other it seeks to encourage needed social reforms that are, at least in the short run, inherently destructive of political stability. The most difficult aspect of all is that what the US is trying to deal with is essentially an internal contest within Latin American society.

The contemporary ferment in Latin America is giving rise to a revolutionary struggle for power among major groups which constitute the present class structure. As these groups contest for advantage, the accommodations they make, one to another, and the self-restraint each is willing to exercise in the employment of its own specific kind of power will determine to what extent the revolution will be violent. The political balance they finally establish among themselves will, in large measure, determine what kind of new order ultimately emerges.

Although the traditional order seems destined to disappear, there is no warrant that constitutional democracy on the Anglo-Saxon model will take its place, either in the short or long run. Latin America is an area in which government of the many by the few through the use of coercive

force is accepted as legitimate simply because this is the way it has always been. Accordingly, there is a high probability that even where moves are made in the direction of constitutional democracy, its actual acceptance as the legitimate basis for government will take place only when the kind of political consensus necessary to such government permeates the whole society.

In the meanwhile, the several constituent groups now contending for power need to be carefully assessed and their relative positions clearly understood if sound US policies are to be developed. It is this fact which makes it imperative that the nature and role of the indigenous military forces be fully understood, since they represent one of the more prominent groups whose conduct will help determine the future of Latin America.

The Latin American Military

In the 19 Latin American countries (other than Cuba) a combined military force of some 700,000 men serves an aggregate population of about 221 million. They represent from 0.1 percent of the population, as in Haiti, to 0.6 percent of the population in Paraguay and Argentina. The comparable figure for the United States, with its world-wide commitments, is 1.5 percent. Three-quarters of the Latin American military are army personnel, one-sixth navy and one-twelfth air force. Three of the smaller countries, Panama, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, rely on security forces rather than conventional armies for national defense.

Most Latin American armies are made up of professional officer and non-commissioned officer corps and masses of conscripts. They are strongly anti-communist and for the most part tend to be pro-American in outlook. They are equipped with many diverse types of weapons and much of their equipment, by US standards, is obsolescent. This is also the case with regard to the weapons and materiel of the air forces and navies. The importance of such deficiencies, however, tends to diminish when the roles these forces are called upon to play are considered.

To the three typical roles of military forces, i.e. to protect the sovereignty of the nation, to preserve internal order, and to play a constructive part in national economic development—must be added in the case of Latin America, a fourth one of special significance, namely, to act as political arbiter. These four roles are discussed below under the headings of Defense, Internal Security, Civic Action and Political Power.

Defense Role

Long-standing rivalries involving, for example, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina provide some basis for these countries to maintain forces to insure an appropriate



Student riot in Caracas—" . . . acts of violence range from flag burnings to sabotage."

level of respect for their diplomacy among their neighbors and for defense against external armed attack. Given the nature of modern warfare and the cost of the sophisticated weapons systems it requires, it is generally recognized that Latin America must rely primarily upon the United States for defense against attack by a major power. For the same reasons, there is a general awareness that only a few countries could make a significant contribution of combat forces to combined operations outside their own territory. On the whole, the low probability of any serious external attack has tended to minimize the external defense role of Latin America's military forces and to give corresponding emphasis to their internal security role.

Internal Security

The predominant function of Latin American armies for well over a hundred years has been that of establishing and maintaining order within their countries. Historically used to pacify the countryside by force and with their allegiance based on personal attachment to heroic leaders, the military forces retain today some of their earlier attributes as national institutions for the preservation of order. In effect, they constitute a nationwide military police providing, in all but a few countries, the basic arm of central government authority. Where non-military institutions

for preserving order have developed sufficiently, as exemplified by Mexico, Uruguay and Chile, this police role of the military has diminished accordingly.

The present social turmoil in Latin America has erupted in many countries in acts of violence ranging from flag-burnings and mass demonstrations to industrial sabotage, urban terrorism and guerrilla warfare. These disorders, especially where they are aided and abetted by communist leadership and supplies from abroad, continually threaten the internal security of the area. In dealing with the more extreme of such situations each type of military force has a potential role: the army, with air force support as needed, to deal directly with outbreaks of violence; and both air and naval forces to provide transport to remote areas and maintain surveillance against the hostile introduction of men and supplies from abroad.

However, the maintenance of internal security requires the concerted efforts of military forces, paramilitary forces, civil police and the government. Military forces represent but one element, and they cannot function effectively unless the other elements, particularly the civilian political leadership, play their parts. To cite one example, the reluctance of governments to establish bilateral or multilateral arrangements for the control of travelers, handicaps efforts to stop the infiltra-

US AND LATIN AMERICA

tion of subversives. Another handicap is the fact that many of the legal systems require courts to free prisoners, even notorious guerrillas, without regard for the circumstances of their capture, unless witnesses can testify that they actually saw the accused commit the crime with which he is charged. These are not military problems, but they do illustrate some of the limitations on the effectiveness of military forces in an internal security role.

A perennial question in this connection is the proper balance between the roles of military and police units. Among eminent authorities on the subject, among US officials and, indeed, with few exceptions, among the military and civil authorities themselves in Latin America, there is virtually unanimous agreement on the correct answer. All accept the principle that police forces should be considered as having primary initial responsibility for the law and order aspects of internal security, and that military forces should be employed only when police forces are unable to do the job.

It is not on what "should be" that opinions and judgments differ, but on what can be made to work. This depends on the existing situation in each country and must, *perforce*, be decided on a case-by-case basis. One of the factors to be considered is the extent to which the nation or area involved is a community with a political consensus manifested in a framework of law and order whose maintenance needs only to be policed. In the more developed countries, e.g., Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, such a community clearly does exist and police units can and do have primary responsibility for maintaining internal security. By contrast, in most of the other Latin American nations the political consensus is so weak that the obvious presence of military forces is necessary to prevent major challenges to the legal order and the existing regime.

It is chiefly the fact that the societies themselves are underdeveloped which delays the growth of modern professional police forces and not, as it is sometimes charged, the calculated resistance of the military. In most countries where programs have been undertaken to improve the capabilities of civil forces to perform conventional police tasks, including those dealing with internal security, military leaders have interposed no serious objection.

The case is quite different, however, where the police have sought or begun to develop paramilitary capability; i.e., to resemble the regular armed forces in organization, equipment, training or mission. In such instances, military reaction is usually strong and, as in Honduras in 1963, can be quite violent. There is a fundamental reason

for this attitude of the military. Paramilitary forces are primarily political. Their function is to provide visible and effective demonstrations of the power of the state for its own citizenry. This, necessarily, is an encroachment on the domain of the Latin American military, who see themselves as embodying the power of the nation. As the police enhance their paramilitary capabilities, military leaders correctly assess such a turn of events as a threat to one of their fundamental functions and react accordingly.

There is no question of police vs. military roles in cases where insurgents succeed in capturing control of a significant segment of the population and begin to convert it into a source of manpower, logistic support and intelligence for anti-government operations. To move against insurrectionists in this situation would require armed units organized, equipped and trained to carry out sustained operations in a hostile environment—in short, military forces in place of police.

Even so, the task is not a conventional one. Instead of defeating enemy forces in a fire fight, of seizing territory or of dominating a battlefield, the primary objective must be the reconquest, on behalf of the government, of the confidence of the civil populace of the area where the insurgents are operating. The basic role of the military is to contain the threat of violence long enough to allow the institution of politico-economic measures to overcome the appeals of the insurrectionists to the target population. Military "sweeps" through the area, even with the most modern equipment, may locate and eliminate a few guerrillas but are unlikely to yield any lasting result. The fundamental need is to change the environment from a hostile to a friendly one where ordinary police measures can maintain order.

The crucial point which must be recognized is that unless a government has the political will to devise and put into effect measures to win a disaffected population to its side, there is little even highly trained and fully equipped military forces can do. To put the matter in a word, the internal threat arises out of the political weakness of a society and not from its absolute military inadequacies. It is the pressing need for reform in the social structure and the failure of political parties and institutions to provide effective remedies for their nation's difficulties which make a number of Latin American societies easy marks for internal aggression.

Civic Action

In recognition of the fact that the internal security problem in Latin America arises out of mounting social tensions, the military forces of almost all Latin American countries today engage in some form of civil works, such as road building, school construction, the provision of medical services to remote areas, literacy and vocational train-

ing, and the like. The Brazilian and Chilean armed forces have a long history of such programs. In other Latin American countries these activities are of fairly recent origin, but in almost all countries the military strongly support them, partly because they benefit the country, and partly because they result in greater respect and regard for the armed forces among the civil population.

Political Power

The major role of military forces in Latin American politics is widely recognized and just as widely misunderstood as to its causes and why it continues. The phenomenon has deep historical and cultural roots. From their earliest days, Latin American governments have relied upon military force for their authority. In fact, so close has this relationship been that it has usually made very little practical difference whether the chief of government was a military officer or a civilian. Contributing to popular acceptance of rule by military officers is the cultural affinity of Latin Americans for allegiance to personal leaders who demonstrate their possession of power.

A number of factors contribute, even today, to a continuing political role for the military in much of Latin America. In those countries where their role appears dominant, there has not yet developed both a workable and popularly accepted basis among *civilian political groups* for the orderly transfer of power from one government to another. Political factions defeated in an election tend to accept the mandate of the polls only so long as the elected government can command sufficient military power to keep opposition groups from overthrowing it by force. In this kind of political setting, the key role played by the military establishments in domestic politics is less cause than result.

In those countries where the military are a major, even though not decisive, political factor, they are regarded by the people generally as the guarantors of the nation's constitution and therefore the ultimate arbiters of questions regarding the conduct of the government in office. When the military in such countries become convinced, either by their own leaders or by political groups seeking their support, that the government in office is violating constitutional principles or endangering the safety of the nation they have, in their view of their role as arbiter, a fundamental justification for action against the government.

Both of the foregoing factors contribute to the high incidence of *coups* and unscheduled changes of governments in Latin America. In the last fifteen years 34 such changes have occurred, not counting five assassinations of heads of governments. Only Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Uruguay had no such experience during this period. Such changes occurred once in Haiti, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru; twice in Argentina,

Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama and Venezuela; three times in Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala and Honduras; and four times in the Dominican Republic.

None of these activities are consistent with Anglo-Saxon patterns of representative constitutional government, nor are they matters to which the United States can or should remain indifferent. Nevertheless, they are facts which US policies must and do take into account in trying to assist these countries in dealing with their problems.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, it is incorrect to charge, as has sometimes been done, that United States assistance to the military in underdeveloped Latin nations is based on the notion that the military constitute a base of organized society upon which can be built economically viable government, or to allege that the modest amount of military materiel and training the US has provided them interferes with the process of social change and hinders progress in economic development.

Such statements overlook the fact that the whole thrust of US military assistance is in the direction of helping these countries establish apolitical military forces, responsive to civilian control and, through civic action programs, taking a constructive part in the economic development of their nations. Such statements also overlook the very real problems these countries face in dealing with terrorism, banditry and subversion, which if not dealt with by the military in concert with other government authorities, will destroy any hopes of political freedom, social reform or economic development.

It is a truism that political freedom in Latin America cannot be fully realized until the political role of the military diminishes considerably. Yet until some basic social reforms are accomplished and some of the goals of the Alliance for Progress realized, there is little practical hope for a diminishing domestic role for Latin American military forces. At the same time, unless the military can function as a stabilizing element in the current upheavals, the political, social and economic progress the Alliance seeks will be rendered impossible.

The dilemma for US policy-makers is painfully obvious. The problems of the area are many and complex, and few, if any, are likely to have wholly satisfactory or clean-cut solutions. Indeed, some of them may remain frustratingly insoluble for years to come. Should this prove to be the case, a constructive contribution to public discussion could be made by critics of government action if they would take into account some of the factors outlined in this paper and above all remember that the policy-maker cannot "change this sorry scheme of things entire." He must deal with the world as it is.

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