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U.S. Military Training for Latin America

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During the course of the cold war, U.S. policy toward Latin America was shaped by the steadfast belief that the region's militaries were our strongest and most dependable allies. The collapse of the Soviet bloc has brought little change. Though U.S. policymakers now perceive drug traffickers, not communist insurgents, as the greatest regional threat, they remain driven by the belief that the best way to achieve their goals is to strengthen military-to-military ties. Military training programs continue to offer Washington the most direct route for expanding U.S. engagement with Latin American forces.

Whether its purpose has been to halt the spread of communism or the flow of drugs into the U.S., strengthening Latin American militaries has come at the expense of the very people the armed forces are supposed to serve and protect. And nowhere has the corrosive effect on civilian society been more evident than at the centerpiece of U.S. training for Latin American militaries—the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA).

Except for the CIA, no U.S. institution is more notorious for its subversion of democracy and human rights in this hemisphere than the SOA. Founded in 1946 at the U.S. Army's Southern Command in Panama and relocated to Ft. Benning (GA) in 1984, in its first 50 years of operation, the school has produced 58,000 graduates, who have come from every country in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Currently, SOA's 75 military and civilian instructors teach 52 courses at an official cost to U.S. taxpayers of $3.8 million. Critics estimate that actual costs run as high as $18 million annually. Classes (taught in Spanish) range from general courses on command structure to specific instruction in reconnaissance, weapons handling, commando tactics, counterintelligence, and counterinsurgency.

Key Points

- In the post-cold war era, U.S. policy in Latin America continues to be driven by the belief that Latin America's militaries are our most capable and reliable allies.
- U.S.-funded training programs strengthen military-to-military ties—a process that historically has undermined civilian institutions and fueled human rights abuses throughout Latin America.
- The long-standing Pentagon claim that it is not responsible for a few bad apples who receive U.S. training was belied last year by the declassification of torture manuals used at the School of the Americas and for training elsewhere in Latin America.

A 1997 press release describes the school's mission as "training Latin American soldiers to be military professionals serving under democratic civilian leadership." But its list of graduates tells a far different tale—one that explains why critics have dubbed the facility "School of Assassins" and "School for Dictators." Since 1968, ten SOA graduates have become heads of state in six different countries through nondemocratic means, including Gen. Manuel Noriega in Panama, "dirty war" leader Gen. Roberto Viola in Argentina, and Brigadier General Juan Melgar Castro in Honduras. The school's alumni also include 48 of the 69 officers cited by the 1993 UN Truth Commission for committing the worst atrocities during El Salvador's civil war, four of the five ranking Honduran officers accused of organizing death squads in the mid-eighties, and the top three Peruvian officers convicted in 1994 of murdering nine university students and a professor.

The Pentagon has repeatedly insisted that the SOA is not responsible for such bad apples, but the extent of its culpability became apparent last year with the declassification of seven military training manuals used at the school and for training elsewhere in Latin America. These manuals include instruction in kidnapping, extortion, torture, and assassination. The Pentagon argues that the manuals were used only from 1984 to 1991. Independent investigations have revealed, however, that not only were these torture manuals part of a series of official U.S. military training manuals dating back to 1965, but that similar U.S.-produced manuals existed at least as early as 1954, when they were used to help topple the democratic government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala.

The SOA is only one of the U.S. taxpayer-funded facilities used to train our Latin American allies. Others include the Inter-American Air Forces Academy at Lackland Air Force Base (TX), the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Chaffee (AR), and the Inter-American Defense College at Ft. McNair in Washington, DC. In addition, the Pentagon, with assistance from other U.S. agencies, provides in country training throughout the region. All of this training serves to strengthen the hand of Latin American militaries.

Problems With Current U.S. Policy

The Clinton administration rarely fails to take advantage of any public occasion that allows it to boast that today, after decades of dictatorships and military rule, every country from the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego, with the exception of Cuba, has embraced democratic rule. What the White House never mentions, however, is that its policy of continued and expanded engagement with the region's militaries is stunting the growth of these nascent democracies, threatening their development beyond infancy.

With the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, China's capitalist turn, and an end to most of the hemisphere's revolutionary movements, U.S. training programs, including those at the SOA, lost their anticommunist rationale for being. This void, however, has been filled by the U.S. drug war. As Rep. Bob Barr (R-GA) said in September 1997 in explaining his support for continued funding for the SOA, "The cold war may be over, but the war against narcotics traffickers is not." The Clinton administration raised the same argument in opposing all efforts to close the SOA, which has been providing Latin American forces with counternarcotics training since the late-1980s.

In addition to the SOA, the U.S. military provides antidrug training at the Army's Jungle Operations Training Center at Fort Clayton and at the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School at Rodman Naval Station (both of which are based in Panama), as well as in-country instruction by U.S. Special Forces. While counternarcotics training, whether conducted in-country or at U.S. facilities, is widely viewed by the Pentagon as critical for accomplishing one of its key post-cold war objectives—fostering closer ties with the region's armed forces—there are a number of serious problems inherent in these programs. For example, in Peru, Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere, some of the military officers being recruited to combat drugtrafficking have been closely linked to the trade (see *In Focus: U.S. Drug Control Policy*).

Instead of bolstering civilian judicial institutions, which are critical to democratic growth, these programs undermine them, as military personnel are thrust into law enforcement roles more appropriate for civilian police, who operate with greater transparency and accountability. Training armed forces in surveillance tactics to be used on their own citizens, for example, is deeply disturbing to many Latin Americans, given the way such practices have been used historically to systematically violate basic human rights. The U.S. track record on training Latin America's police is not, however, much better. In 1973, Congress outlawed U.S. police training abroad following revelations of severe human rights abuses in Uruguay, Argentina, and elsewhere.

Since 1978, the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program has been the principal funding source for all training of Latin American military personnel, including the majority of SOA students. The program was established by Congress, in part to develop awareness of the "basic issues involving internationally recognized human rights." In 1990, Congress unveiled "expanded IMET" or E-IMET, a program intended to increase training related to defense-resource management and civil-military relations as well as human rights.

The Clinton administration has bolstered its funding for these programs despite efforts by some Latin American leaders to imitate Costa Rica and convert militaries into police forces. Clinton has requested that the current $43.4-million allocation—of which 20% (or $8.7 million) is earmarked for Latin America and the Caribbean—be increased to $50 million in FY 1998.

Although expanded IMET-funded programs may increase awareness of human rights issues, such awareness does not necessarily improve respect for human rights. A former instructor at the SOA, which has implemented numerous courses to meet the objectives of IMET and E-IMET, maintains that the human rights message is not taken seriously by Latin American students, who associate human rights with subversives. After teaching a human rights course in 1993, Charles Call of the Washington Office on Latin America pointed out that "much of the training at the school is done by officers from Latin American militaries, which have strongly resisted increased civilian control and accountability."

A critical failure of U.S. human rights training for Latin American militaries is, according to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, its emphasis on preparing students to respond appropriately to particular combat situations. Such training is no longer applicable, because in the vast majority of countries in the region civil strife has given way to fragile peace and democratic rule. Today, human rights training needs to be aimed at increasing the political will of militaries to submit to civilian control and to allow themselves to be held accountable for their actions.

But the greatest weakness of these training programs may be the fact that Washington has not led by example, refusing to demand the same accountability from U.S. institutions that it seeks from its regional allies. Insufficient leadership by the White House was illustrated by its lack of support for congressional efforts to hold accountable those persons who ordered, prepared, and distributed the SOA torture manuals. The Clinton administration has routinely allowed the Pentagon, CIA, and other U.S. agencies to avoid a full disclosure of their past roles in undermining democracy and human rights in this hemisphere.

Key Problems

- Washington continues to rely too heavily on Latin America's militaries to implement U.S. policy, even as the policy focus has shifted from combating communism to fighting drugtrafficking.
- Military personnel are being trained for law enforcement roles more appropriate to civilian police, who operate with greater transparency and accountability.
- Latin American militaries have not increased their respect for human rights and civilian control, in part because Washington fails to lead by example.

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The primary objective of U.S. policy toward Latin America should be the creation of stable, democratic regimes. Rhetoric emanating from the White House, Congress, and elsewhere in Washington has been unwavering in support of this goal. But current U.S. policy belies this rhetoric with its heavy dependence on the region's military forces and its expanded sales of military equipment. (see *In Focus: Latin American Arms Sales and Demilitarization*).

The Clinton administration and Congress should begin by closing the School of the Americas, as proposed by Rep. Joseph Kennedy (D-MA) in H.R. 611 (a measure that has attracted well over 100 cosponsors) and by Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) in Senate bill S980. This symbol of U.S. affiliation with abusive and undemocratic militaries has become so tarnished that no amount of adjustment to its curriculum and operations could even begin to polish its image. Closing the SOA would send a clear message to everyone in the region—military and civilian—that fostering democratization is at the top of Washington's regional agenda.

Washington must also redesign its international drug control strategy, because as it is currently structured it has been militarizing society in Peru, Mexico, and elsewhere in the region by providing local armed forces with an internal security role. U.S. policy should be aimed at developing the capacity of civilian police and judicial institutions to address the serious threat posed by drugtrafficking. U.S. Justice Department agencies, not military personnel, should conduct these programs. At the same time, U.S. policy should support the principle that the role of the military—both U.S. and foreign—is to guard against external threats, not to involve itself in domestic affairs.

Key Recommendations

- Washington should commit to fostering democratic growth in the region by closing the SOA.
- U.S. training programs designed to bolster civilian capacities to control their militaries should be strengthened and expanded.
- The White House should demand a full inquiry into the SOA "torture manuals" and declassify documents related to past U.S. complicity in undermining democratic institutions.

Whether U.S. counternarcotics assistance is being sent to military forces or to police, it is critical to ensure that this aid is not accruing to those with records of abusive practices. Last year, Congress attached a provision to the foreign operations spending bill that prohibited funds from the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) from being sent to military units if there is credible evidence that they are responsible for gross violations of human rights. This year, amendment sponsor Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) is seeking to extend the ban to cover all aid programs financed through the foreign operations bill. Congress should next consider a further extension to cover programs funded through the Defense Department authorization bill.

U.S. military training programs must be curtailed and revamped to ensure that Latin America's armed forces are imbued with respect for human rights, democracy, and civilian control. Even if this were achieved, however, it would be insufficient. The IMET program needs to bolster military respect for civilian control and to provide inexperienced civilian authorities with the expertise necessary to exert that control. The Senate, led by Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), has taken a good first step by approving a measure that earmarks 30% of IMET funding for E-IMET programs that place a greater emphasis on military subordination to civilian control. The measure also requires that at least 25% of the E-IMET students be civilians. For civilian control to be effective, however, both of these percentages need to be increased dramatically.

Congress also needs to amend IMET to ensure that funding is not used by military forces to construct roads and schools, operate health clinics, and conduct environmental remediation. This work is essential, but it must be done by civilian agencies or nongovernmental organizations, not by militaries seeking a new mission.

Given that the one legitimate function of militaries is to guard against external threats (and these are disappearing quickly throughout the region), the Clinton administration should support the efforts being spearheaded by former Costa Rican president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Oscar Arias to convert certain armies into domestic police forces. Such efforts will be undermined if Washington continues its failure to display leadership in holding its own military and intelligence agencies accountable to the public they serve. The White House could begin by rejecting the Pentagon's claim that it has done all it can do in the case of the SOA training manuals. The president should ask the Justice Department to determine whether these and similar training materials violate U.S. law and international human rights agreements and if they do, those responsible for the manuals should be held accountable.

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http://www.clark.net/pub/dfd

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