

While the giant is distracted

BABY BOOMERS grew up fearing dominoes just as the millennial generation frets about terrorists toting suitcase nukes. The cold war era "domino effect" theory had supposedly totalitarian "communist" regimes sweeping the world, one after another like a falling line of dominoes. Hence, the first domino must never fall. This was the rationale for war against Vietnam's indigenous communist insurgency. Once we accepted the domino theory, it quickly became the official rationale for dozens of interventions, or "soft wars," against democratic governments asserting self-determination in Latin America and the Caribbean – all of which were tarred as "communists".

If their democracy threatened our supply of cheap bananas, for example, the CIA would topple their government – usually replacing it with a U.S. trained and armed military dictatorship. Hence, the term "banana republic," referring to nations whose impoverished populations toiled away on fincas producing cheap fruit and winter crops for American supermarkets. Whenever one of these nations overthrew its dictator, we'd squash its new government, reinstall military control, and laugh at its "political instability."

Today's banana republics are often environmentally devastated after generations of unsustainable high-yield foreign controlled corporate agriculture and the ensuing soil erosion that often follows when traditional agricultural practices are ignored. Haiti is a

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perfect example – deforested and eroded, much of this formerly tropical nation resembles a desert. But they still have something we want – cheap labor. The poverty of Haiti and other similar nations provides the soil for producing cheap sweatshop imports, which are ironically sold in American stores with names like “Banana Republic.”

Since the end of World War II, the United States launched military aggression against democratically elected governments in Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964), the Dominican Republic (1965 – invaded to stop restoration of a deposed democratically elected government), Chile (1973), Nicaragua (1980-98) and Haiti (2004). These interventions varied in form from organizing and training proxy armies to aerial bombardment by the U.S. The C.I.A. also used terrorism, disinformation and economic warfare to overthrow democratically elected governments in Ecuador (1960-63), Guyana (1964) and Jamaica (1976-80), and to destabilize democratic governments in Costa Rica (1950s, 1970-71). It used similar means to thwart democratic movements or prop up dictatorships in Haiti (1959), Bolivia (1964-1975), Uruguay (1964-1970), Peru (1965), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (1960, 1962-1993). The U.S. also attacked not so democratic regimes in the region that asserted self-determination such as Cuba (1959 – present), Suriname (1982), Panama (1991), and Grenada (1979-1984). There, the U.S. first destabilized the elected Grenadian government, then overthrew the subsequent military regime, taking over the national radio station in the process and providing a Beach Boys soundtrack for an American military invasion.

The best known cases of U.S. aggression are the coup against Chile, which gave that country three decades of a murderous dictatorship, and the wars against the Central American nations of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua – three countries essentially transformed by U.S. policy into hells on earth. In Guatemala we overthrew a popular democratically elected president because, according to historic documents, he angered United Fruit (Chiquita). The U.S. supported successive brutal regimes practicing genocide against the nation’s indigenous Mayan majority, resulting in the destruction of over 1,000 villages and the deaths of over 100,000 people. Nicaragua’s Sandinista government provided what Noam Chomsky calls, “the threat of a good example,” building schools, electric generators and health care facilities for Nicaragua’s poorest people. Nicaragua was a living breathing advertisement for democratic socialism. Hence, it was those facilities that the C.I.A. orchestrated “Contra” terrorists targeted in a war against the Nicaraguan people. It was the liberation theologians within the Catholic Church, and their followers, who wound up in the crosshairs in El Salvador, where U.S. trained and armed government troops and death squads killed over 75,000 people.

Then came a period of relative quiet in the 1990s, when Latin American and Caribbean

political activists seem to have internalized a “resistance is futile” mantra. In the Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush era, any political gains will no doubt invite the wrath of the United States. I lived in Central America in the late 1980s. There was war, but there was always hope – hope that war would give way to something better. When I returned in the mid 1990s there was “peace,” but there wasn’t any hope. This hopelessness gave way to desperation and a debilitating crime wave that’s still ravaging Guatemala and El Salvador.

Thank Bush

Then came the administration of George W. Bush, and ironically, the most successful revolutionary push in Latin American history – using ballot boxes to further democracy and a form of socialism that promises to address the crippling inequalities in the region. Ironically, this transformation didn’t occur under a regime such as Jimmy Carter’s, with its human rights rhetoric, but under the most aggressive militaristic American government since Woodrow Wilson.

It’s the Bush administration’s arrogant in-your-face push toward empire, complete with its stated Project for a New American Century goal of world domination (read it in their own words at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>), coupled with a level of incompetence unprecedented in an American administration, that has created the perfect storm of democracy that’s now blowing across Latin America. The Bush administration has laid the mechanics of empire out in the open for all to see. American empire is no longer a leftist intellectual theory. It’s an anti-democratic force that’s visible on TV globally, sandwiched in between the Michael Jackson and Robert Blake trials. And it’s failing. The empire is bogged down in a sandy Iraqi quagmire. It’s doubtful that Iraq’s murderous resistance fighters share much political ideology with the democratic socialists in Latin America. Hell – the Cubans lambasted Che for being a poor dancer – I can’t seem them embracing a tea-totaling Osama bin Laden. But the geopolitical world stage ironically has Iraq’s mujahideen fighting as the foot soldiers in Latin America’s struggle for self-determination.

Here’s how it works. The U.S. attacked Iraq. Maybe the imperial plan was to then roll on to Syria and Iran after “Mission Accomplished,” seizing enough oil to power America’s SUV habit, before returning home to set our own hemisphere in order. But the U.S. is still in Iraq – and it ain’t going anywhere. Bush’s Islamofascist fundamentalist foes, who never had power in Iraq, now constitute a major political force there, essentially controlling many of that country’s cities. Seventeen hundred American troops are dead, and there’s only more despair on the horizon. The empire is not invincible. And it’s distracted in a big way.

It began in Venezuela

The first chink in the United States' Latin American armor appeared in 2002 when the U.S. supported a military coup against Venezuela's democratically elected (1999) president, Hugo Chavez. The coup seemed to initially go off as planned, and the U.S. quickly recognized the new strongman at the same time Latin American leaders condemned the coup. But the Bush administration was also distracted cooking intelligence and planning for its eventual invasion of Iraq. Suddenly the Venezuelan coup fell apart and a now angry Chavez was back in power (see Getting a Grip 4/8/04, 5/9/02).

The U.S. financed a 2004 electoral recall against Chavez, but Venezuelan voters kept Chavez in power, giving him a landslide victory and a real electoral mandate. Chavez, never the gentleman, has since been wilding with rudeness, crooning on like a pissed off adolescent insisting that Condoleezza Rice is hot for his pecker. But lack of grace and tact notwithstanding, Chavez is the legitimate elected leader of Venezuela – and he's an avowed socialist of sorts, using his nation's oil wealth (his government owns Citgo) to finance health care and education. His ability to prosper politically while rhetorically savaging the American administration has provided a domino of inspiration to democratic movements for self-determination across Latin America. The giant is invincible. And Chavez, the loose canon populist punk from the barrio, has proven it.

The following year (2003), Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Ecuador all broke ranks with the U.S. and elected left-leaning leaders. The first to be inaugurated was Brazil's new president, Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva (He goes by "Lula"), who boldly predicted that "leftist" parties would control most of Latin America by 2010. He seems to be on target. Uruguay joined the leftist team this year, breaking a 170-year tradition of right-wing leaders by electing left-leaning Tabare Vazquez.

Suddenly, Bolivia, Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua are all in-play. Bolivian peasants shut down their country last month with a paralyzing general strike, forcing last week's resignation of that nation's pro-U.S. president. Bolivians, the majority of whom are both indigenous and desperately poor, are demanding new elections. The story in Bolivia is much like the rest of Latin America where pro-U.S. governments capitulated to the demands of the U.S. led World Bank and International Monetary Fund, ripping their nation's social fabric apart with draconian "structural adjustment" "austerity plans." These policies have gutted public education, health and infrastructure programs while privatizing state-owned assets. The privatization often put multinational corporations in charge of essential services such as drinking water and communications. The corporations then often denied services to the poorest people, causing political mayhem.

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The purpose of structural adjustment was to raise money to pay off interest owed to American and European banks which loaned money in the 1970s and early 1980s to Latin American and Caribbean governments. The money was squandered or looted by these governments, often financing anti-democratic military repression against the very same people who the international financial institutions now expect to repay these loans.

Free Market freefall

Today, this debt burden gives international monetary organizations the power to dictate economic policy to compliant Latin American governments. And the policy they're dictating is the neo-conservative dream model of radical privatization of state-owned monopolies, unabated plunder of resources and the elimination of taxes, education and social services. The ensuing chaos has resulted in hunger, sickness and widening gaps of economic disparity – all of which are stirring up revolutionary fervor while illuminating the failures of the free market model. This model also led to a slide in Latin America's gross domestic product over the past seven years, causing many middle class business people to join the struggle for change. Latin American people see governments that support this model as capitulationists. When the structural readjustment caused countries such as Argentina to experience economic collapse, the U.S. left them out in the cold to suffer, and their capitulationist governments collapsed.

In Columbia, El Salvador and Mexico – countries still run by conservative pro-U.S. governments – leftist parties now control the major municipal governments. The socialist Sandinistas recently scored sweeping victories in local elections across Nicaragua and are now posed to retake control of their national government.

On the Caribbean front, Haitians have refused to accept the regime installed after last year's U.S. backed coup (see Getting a Grip 3/4/04, 3/11/04, 6/10/04). Most Caribbean and Latin American countries have also refused to recognize the new regime. Thousands of Haitians have recently died as protestors loyal to the ousted president face off against the new U.S. backed government, leaving Haiti mired in violence and chaos. The new Haitian government has no more authority in Haiti than the new U.S. created regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan have in those chaos-ridden countries. Hence, the U.S. State Department recently ordered all non-essential American personnel out of Haiti.

Bush's greatest accomplishment

With failures in Haiti and Venezuela, the Bush administration has struck out in this hemisphere – and suddenly the whole geopolitical landscape is in play. The Organization of American States (OAS), which has historically been dominated by the U.S., recently