

Democracy's northward march

IF you relied on the US media for your worldview, you probably grew up equating Latin America with dictatorship and chronic political instability. Terms like “banana republic” worked their way into our language, giving mainstream respectability to ignorance and xenophobia. According to our government and media, “those people” couldn’t govern themselves – hence periodic US invasions were sold to us as nothing less than altruism.

Of course, as is often the case, the reality is the opposite of the perception. Modern Latin American history is pockmarked with struggles for democracy brutally suppressed by US governments. Of the approximately 49 US military incursions in Latin America since 1849, most were to suppress unions, workers movements and popular governments. In addition to military incursions, sometimes we just turned the screws, threatening force or economic chaos. In 1909, for example, the US used such pressure in Nicaragua to remove that country’s government after they started taxing US-owned banana and mining companies – hence the term “banana republic.” The new government was run by an officer of a US mining corporation. We invaded Cuba a few years later to quash a movement of sugar workers demanding a living wage. Nine years later, at the behest of United Fruit – marketer of Chiquita bananas – we forced Guatemala’s government out of power.

As the 20th century wore on, both corporations and the democratic movements that opposed them grew stronger, putting US forces on a crash course with Latin America’s democratic destiny. In 1954 Guatemala’s newly elected democratic government

DEMOCRACY'S NORTHWARD MARCH / 2

addressed domestic hunger and poverty by introducing land reform and seizing fallow United Fruit land, reimbursing the company based on values it set on its own property tax declarations. Our country responded to such "communism" by orchestrating a military coup against Guatemala's democratically elected government, supported by a US Air Force strike on Guatemala City. The new US-backed dictator immediately returned peasant farms to United Fruit control and made labor strikes capital offenses punishable by death. Guatemala descended into hell on earth for the ensuing 40 years, with a genocidal war destroying more than 1,000 Mayan villages, while we got another half century of cheap bananas and pineapples.

In 1961 the CIA overthrew the elected government of Ecuador for the crime of maintaining friendly relations with Cuba. In 1963 we overthrew the Dominican Republic's elected government, finally invading in 1965 when that same social-democratic government returned to power in what we termed a "communist" rebellion. In 1973 we orchestrated a violent coup to remove Chile's popular democratically elected government after they took over an American corporation's telephone monopoly. In the 1980s, when Reagan came to power, we launched a full-scale terrorist war to unseat Nicaragua's elected leftist "Sandinista" government.

Incompetence and hope

Today, however, things have changed. The American empire is careening out of control as incompetents, drunk with an illusion of power, recklessly pilot us into fiscal and moral bankruptcy. With the Bush administration focused on, and bogged down in, the Middle East, a wave of democracy is sweeping over Latin America. And for the first time in history, the US isn't there to stop it.

It's not that the Bushistas haven't tried. It's just that they're too stupid, poisoned by their own hubris, and spread far too thin. Their coup against Venezuela's elected socialist president, Hugo Chavez, lasted for one day. He came back to power more popular than ever – and he's pissed. Flush with petrodollars and with a fresh landslide reelection under his belt, he's rising as South America's strongest leader.

Our 2004 coup unseating Haiti's wildly popular president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, also proved to be a fiasco. With nothing left to live for, the Haitian people stopped fearing death. The US- and Canadian-backed government of convicted drug traffickers and mass murderers killed thousands of Haitians before finally crumbling in the face of a relentless democratic opposition. Last month Haitians took to the streets triumphantly defending the popular results of an election that put Aristide's former right-hand man into power.

Similar democratic upsets this year put democratic socialist governments in power in

DEMOCRACY'S NORTHWARD MARCH / 3

Chile and Bolivia. In Chile Michele Bachelet, a tortured victim of that nation's US coup, became the first woman president, while the electorate in Bolivia put Evo Morales, an outspoken indigenous rights activist, into power. With Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay already ruled by democratic socialist governments, and with democratic socialists leading in the polls in Peru and Mexico, Latin America is now dominated by popular elected governments that are beginning to put the anti-democratic power of multinational corporations in check. Even the aforementioned Sandinistas are poised to return to power, with Daniel Ortega, their president during the 1980s, leading polls to return as that nation's socialist president.

Fencing out democracies

It seems there is a domino effect. But it's not the cold war domino effect of Soviet imperialist domination that our leaders used for so many years to justify our own bankrupting militarism. It's the domino of people power – of a critical mass of home-grown democracy. And it's moving fast and heading this way.

With Latin American nations emerging as US-proof democracies, anti-democratic forces here are beginning to scramble. Republicans in Congress, bearing hundreds of suits but only one mind, voted to build a 2,000-mile wall along the Mexican border, in essence trying to fence out the Latin American democracies. Of course the fence is really just a concept. In today's economy we'd need immigrants to build it and foreign governments to finance it. And, quite frankly, both groups are fed up with underwriting their own repression.

The Republican bill passed by the House proposes more than a fence – it's a full-frontal assault on our dwindling civil rights. Eleven million undocumented immigrants will instantly become felons while legal US resident "aliens" could be held indefinitely without charges. Church, health care, social service and educational personnel who work with undocumented immigrants will also become criminals – committing "crimes" such as feeding immigrants at soup kitchens or providing medical services to them.

Amused by our own demise

The law is a barbaric assault not only on immigrants but on American values. And, as with most of the Bushista outrages of the past six years, Americans are taking this all in stride, as spectators amused by our own destruction. Duck, there goes another civil liberty – don't let it wing you in the head on its way to the trash heap.

But not all Americans are used to acquiescing to their own demise. Among us are tens of millions of immigrants and the children of immigrants, people who actually struggled

DEMOCRACY'S NORTHWARD MARCH / 4

to come here to be part of something they believed in. People whose own experiences and recent oral history teaches them not to take liberty for granted. And, in the case of Latin American immigrants, most are coming from societies with strong traditions of democratic resistance – from countries with strong traditions of public protest. Now they're Americans and they're taking the struggle to our streets, giving us a quick refresher course in civic engagement and responsibility. We're Americans and we have a duty to join them and resist this fascism.

It all began two weeks ago when, by conservative police estimates, more than 100,000 people, led by Latino immigrants, took to the streets in Chicago to protest the Republican legislation – legislation of which most native-born Americans were completely unaware. Though more or less ignored by the corporate media, the demonstration may have been the largest in Chicago's history, with historians hailing it as the largest immigrants' rights protest in US history. That record, however, was short-lived, as between 500,000 and two million protestors took to the streets in Los Angeles two weeks later, in what seems to be that city's largest public gathering in history.

Even more remarkable, 30,000 people rallied against the bill in sleepy Milwaukee – in the home state of Republican Representative James Sensenbrenner, the author of the anti-rights legislation. Another 50,000 rallied in Denver, 20,000 took to the streets in Phoenix and approximately 70,000 shut down Atlanta in a one-day general strike. Last weekend another 100,000 or so people marched in New York.

We once had hope too

This isn't a revolution by any means. To the contrary – it's a revitalization movement. It's a struggle to return to the democratic values that built this country – to the same values that are now sweeping Latin America. Last week tens of thousand of high school students joined the protests and walked out of classes across California as well as in Nevada, Utah, Arizona and Texas. In Long Beach, California, for example, the Long Beach Gazette reports that as many as 10,000 students peaceably rallied for immigrant rights at City Hall – in essence giving a civics lesson to the rest of us. At press time, as school administrators "locked down" high schools across California, elementary and junior high school students have begun walking out in protest. And despite the fact that more than a million people so far have taken to the streets, there has not been a single major incidence of violence on the part of the protestors. This is civic engagement at its finest. It's the vibrant democratic spirit of Latin America, reminding us that we too used to have hope.