

INTERVENTIONS, CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL

Current Scholarship on Inter-American Relations

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Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama. By Russell Crandall. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. Pp. 254. \$28.95 paper.

Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952–1954, 2nd ed. By Nick Cullather. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. Pp. 176. \$17.95 paper.

Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule. By Michel Gobat. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. Pp. 374. \$23.95 paper.

Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America. By J. Patrice McSherry. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Pp. 285. \$32.95 paper.

Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation. By Harvey R. Neptune. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. 274. \$21.95 paper.

Visions of Solidarity: U.S. Peace Activists in Nicaragua from War to Women's Activism and Globalization. By Clare Weber. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006. Pp. 162. \$20.95 paper.

The U.S. interventions in the Western Hemisphere were once a very conventional topic of study in a field hidebound by conventions. Two decades ago, the field of international relations seemed trapped in traditional narratives of interactions among nation-states. In 1992, the diplomatic historian Michael Hunt lamented the plight of his field with the following observation:

Our remarkably sustained exercise in self-reflection and self-criticism over the last two decades was a defensive response to the pointed criticism, if not the wounding indifference directed at diplomatic topics by an historical profession in transformation. Social historians flogged diplomatic history, and political history more generally, for seemingly old-fashioned methods and concerns, especially the tendency to identify with the political elite and to ignore the links between

policy and the patterns of privilege and power within American society and culture. The new cultural history added its own charges: epistemological naiveté and an impoverished sense of the importance of language for an understanding of both historical evidence and historians' discourse. Those with a strong theoretical bent consigned diplomatic historians to the role of hewers-of-wood and drawers of water in their world of international relations theory.¹

The study of international relations has changed dramatically in the years since this expression of scholarly angst. This transformation is most apparent in the area of inter-American relations, where scholars have embraced the perspectives offered by gender theory, ethnohistory, cultural studies, and business history to reexamine and offer fresh insights into what was once the most conventional of topics.² The new scholarship seeks with increasing success to explore and understand both the American and the Latin American sides of these interactions, which have done so much to shape the history of the Western Hemisphere. On one hand, scholars have explored the formulation of a multifaceted American mission that sought to infuse Latin American societies with many of the social, economic, political, and cultural values of their northern neighbor. More recently, researchers have probed the multilayered responses of the ambitious and not infrequently violent projects of this North American colossus. These responses have ranged from strident, sometimes violent, revolutionary anti-Americanism to the incorporation of American popular culture into Latin American national identities.

As with any revolution, this one has not completely overthrown the paradigms of past scholarship. Serious debate continues over the value of some new approaches, especially cultural studies, and researchers from both the left and the right still stress the importance of realpolitik and structuralist factors in understanding inter-American relations. Furthermore, many scholars now echo the conclusion of William Appleman Williams that Latin America has served as "the laboratory of American

1. Michael Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 115–116.

2. For examples of the new scholarship, see Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Thomas F. O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Marcos Cueto, ed., *Missionaries of Science: The Rockefeller Foundation and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chap. 5; Amy Kaplan, "Black and Blue on San Juan Hill," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 219–236; Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Luis A. Pérez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

foreign policy for all underdeveloped areas."³ From this perspective, U.S. actions in Latin America offer insight into world events ranging from the global postwar struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union to the second Gulf War.

The six works that are the subject of this essay reflect the transformation in approaches to inter-American relations and the continuing debate over which methodologies offer meaningful insight into processes of encounter in the Americas, as well as a consensus about the larger significance of inter-American relations for global events. At the same time, the attempt simply to define the term *intervention* illustrates the range of perspectives that students of international relations embrace.

Three of the six books under consideration employ traditional approaches to conventional examples of intervention, in which Washington employed overt or covert military force to shape events in Latin American countries. Included in this category would be the ouster of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz; U.S. invasions of the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama; and Washington's involvement in Operation Condor. Although still examining a conventional form of intervention, the study of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua in the early twentieth century instead relies considerably on the tools of cultural history, without neglecting structuralist factors. Some of the authors treated here nevertheless expand conventional definitions of intervention. Harvey R. Neptune's study of the effects of the U.S. naval base in Trinidad is one example. Clare Weber's work on the changing objectives of U.S. solidarity groups in Nicaragua reminds the reader that U.S. intervention can well be the work of nongovernmental actors, who are as intent as any Washington policy maker to remake the region in ways that they believe are compatible with American interests and values. In short, these authors offer us insights into the subject of intervention that span the entire spectrum of perspectives and interpretations that now comprises the field of international relations.

Russell Crandall's title, *Gunboat Democracy*, and its analysis of the U.S. invasions of the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama make clear his focus on the most traditional form of U.S. intervention in the hemisphere: outright military occupation of small nations in the circum-Caribbean. Crandall's work is traditional in terms of its topic and the questions it raises. Much like the liberal school of international relations some forty years ago, Crandall grapples with the seeming disparity between high ideals, such as democracy and multilateralism, and the reality of military invasion by the United States to overturn and impose its will on another regime. Central to the author's enterprise is the attempt to de-

3. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Delta, 1962), 148.

termine whether the three cases under consideration offer justifications for nonhumanitarian interventions in the post-Cold War era.

It is clear that, in choosing to cast his study in this form, Crandall is quite consciously addressing issues that have arisen from the second Gulf War, and some of the parallels he makes are indeed striking. First, the United States, whatever its official justifications for invasion in the circum-Caribbean, such as protecting American citizens, ultimately acted in pursuit of its own strategic interest. Second, the author notes that decisions by U.S. presidents to intervene were often informed by badly flawed intelligence. Third, there is the counterfactual argument that, if the United States had not acted when it did in the three cases under study, conditions might have deteriorated further, leading to an even more aggressive response from the United States. Crandall takes this argument a step further, as his title suggests, to affirm that these interventions helped to promote democracy. In short, he asserts that, however self-interested and even misguided these invasions may have been, they ultimately had a positive effect on the targeted societies. The implications for the current debate over the war in Iraq need hardly be stated.

While *Gunboat Democracy* offers a detailed account of each of the three interventions it examines, several factors limit the strength of its arguments. First, its background history of U.S. intervention in the region is not well supported. For example, it repeats the myth that CIA actions frightened the Guatemalan army into acting against Arbenz. This interpretation fails to take into account Piero Gleijeses's finding that the army acted against Arbenz under the threat of U.S. invasion.⁴ More broadly, the study relies almost exclusively on U.S. sources. Crandall posits positive outcomes in the three nations that the U.S. invaded, but this argument would have been much stronger if it were supported by evidence garnered from these societies. Finally, the book does not engage perhaps the most important question of all: what exactly does the author mean by *democracy*? As some of the other studies under consideration demonstrate, the idea of democracy held by American policy makers is essentially a system that allows elites to vie peacefully for power, with the larger populace limited to the roles of spectator and endorser of one elite faction over another. This vision of democracy is a far cry from the concern of other actors in the hemisphere for democracies that strive for greater social and economic equality. This is not to say that Crandall's central premise is flawed, however. Traditional U.S. interventions may well have unintended democratizing effects on the targeted societies, an argument that Michel Gobat makes with greater precision in *Confronting the American Dream*.

4. Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

The U.S. involvement in Nicaragua during the first three decades of the twentieth century followed highly conventional patterns. Several U.S. military missions and dollar diplomacy designed to stabilize the nation replicated U.S. tactics elsewhere in the region. Yet Gobat, drawing heavily on Nicaraguan archives, argues that the effects of U.S. intervention often proved dramatically different from what its implementers intended and from what historians have described. Gobat asserts that U.S. policies undermined the economic position of many members of the landowning elite and strengthened agrarian smallholders. These effects encouraged a strong anti-American backlash from elements of the Conservative Party, the chief political beneficiary of U.S. policies. More specifically, dollar diplomacy transmitted to Nicaragua through the restrictive monetary policies imposed by the U.S.-controlled Banco Nacional de Nicaragua, which strangled the operations of many leading coffee growers, who depended on large loans to finance their labor-intensive operations. By comparison, local capital networks met the limited credit needs of smallholders. Furthermore, these small operations produced foodstuffs that benefited from booming markets in neighboring Central American economies. All of this occurred during the 1920s, when agroexport elites elsewhere in Latin America were feasting on massive infusions of capital from U.S. lending institutions. Unintentionally, U.S. intervention diminished the power of some members of the Nicaraguan elite while enhancing that of small agrarian producers. On the other hand, intentional American efforts at democratization eventually had just the opposite impact.

Convinced that political caudillismo lay at the heart of continuing instability in Nicaragua, U.S. officials set out to obliterate it and ensure free and fair elections. Washington employed its own military personnel to control electoral boards between 1928 and 1932 to create a system that would replicate U.S. electoral practices and its vision of democracy in many ways. By limiting electoral competition to the two elite-dominated political parties, it precluded any real form of mass democracy, but it did create conditions in which individual male citizens were far freer to exercise their franchise. But another U.S. strategy, fashioning the Guardia Nacional to serve as the single most important state institution, ultimately undermined democratization. As the Guardia grew in power, it replaced caudillos as the arbiters of local disputes and ensured the thorough militarization of Nicaraguan society. Thus, U.S. efforts to establish a stable democratic state instead laid the institutional foundation for the longest-ruling dictatorial regime in Central American history.

Gobat offers more than a revisionist interpretation of the economic and political impacts of U.S. intervention. He also explores how nineteenth-century U.S. schemes for a Nicaraguan canal shaped the elite's vision of cosmopolitan nationalism, while the deleterious effects of later interventions drove some of the Conservative elite to develop an anti-American

corporatist vision of their future. Given their shared antipathy toward the United States, these Conservatives attempted unsuccessfully to form an alliance with Augusto Sandino. The one disappointment in Gobat's analysis is that it offers no new insights into the roots of Sandinismo and Somocismo, with Sandinismo largely reduced to a mechanism to understand the emergence of anti-Americanism among some elements of the elite.

Of the six works under consideration, Neptune's study of the impact of the U.S. naval base in Trinidad most energetically employs the new perspectives that have influenced international relations scholarship in recent years. Neptune demonstrates that this military "intervention" dramatically influenced the evolution of Trinidad's nationalist movements, gender and race relationships, and definitions and perceptions of popular culture on the island. In the nationalist historiography of Trinidad, the American base built during World War II became a cause célèbre when Prime Minister Eric Williams organized a mass march to denounce the continued U.S. naval presence as a blatant expression of North American imperialism. Yet, as Neptune demonstrates, the base played a far more complicated role in the history of the island than simply that of an extension of U.S. power in the Caribbean.

The United States' presence represented a major challenge to the ideology of prewar Trinidadian nationalists, who were seeking to fashion the image of a pristine island culture that would lie at the heart of the island's liberation. This patriot elite saw the popular embrace of many things American threaten its intellectual initiative. Trinidadian workers flocked to the base seeking employment at wages considerably higher than those available in the domestic economy. Trinidadian women were attracted to U.S. service personnel and their more prosperous lifestyle. Such relationships sparked jealous reactions from some Trinidadian males. However, Neptune notes, this animus did not always find expression in calypso music, the cultural icon of the island. Although calypso lyrics describing relations between American men and Trinidadian women have long been considered an acerbic commentary on the behavior of American men, Neptune interprets the language of calypso as an appeal to the egos of U.S. servicemen, who represented well-heeled customers for calypso performers. And despite the overt racism of these Americans, Trinidadians embraced many aspects of their culture as liberating forms of personal expression, from their casual clothes to their casual social customs. Notwithstanding the apprehensions of the prewar nationalist elite, the economic forces of American modernity and popular culture were incorporated into a new national identity. As in Gobat's study, U.S. interventionism served as a democratizing force, often despite its own intentions.

In Weber's *Visions of Solidarity*, a very different group of American interventionists carried with them a highly conscious and deliberate agenda of liberation. As the United States mounted its covert war against the

Sandinistas, two American volunteer associations worked to counteract the effects of Washington's tactics and alter the U.S. path of aggression. Witness for Peace (WFP) sought to influence the politics and policies of the United States, while the Wisconsin Coordination Council on Nicaragua (WCCN) stressed support for social programs in the Central American country. Weber, who at one time worked for WFP, offers a number of insights into these organizations and their impact on international relations. She argues that much of the power of these associations both in domestic organizing and in their overseas strategies to counter Washington's policies rested on the privileges of whiteness. The demographic base of both groups lay in the white middle class, which enabled them to gain access to members of Congress and to serve as accompaniment volunteers in Nicaragua, where the color of their skin would identify them as U.S. citizens and thus discourage attacks by contra forces. Yet, Weber points out, this domestic base often precluded opportunities to build support among people of color in both the United States and Nicaragua. But the peace organizations soon faced a much greater challenge when the Sandinistas lost the 1990 presidential election, which left the two groups to ponder how to address new international realities.

Eventually, both organizations turned their attention to the process of globalization and, more specifically, to the seeming embrace of neoliberal policies by Nicaragua's postrevolutionary government. Among those policies was what Weber describes as neoliberal democratization or, more simply, elite-dominated electoral systems—in effect, a continuation of the American project of democratization launched nearly a century earlier. But the WCCN and WFP engage neoliberalism primarily at the level of its social and economic impact, with WCCN specifically addressing the disproportionate burden that women bear in economic restructuring, which strips states of many of their social welfare functions. Although Weber offers interesting perspectives on what might be termed *anti-intervention intervention* and the power disparity between activists and those they seek to help, her book, like more conventional studies, does little to offer insight into the perceptions and responses of Nicaraguans to this alternate form of American intervention. This would be a productive avenue of research for her to follow.

Although the cases studied are separated by nearly half a century, both Nick Cullather's *Secret History* and J. Patrice McSherry's *Predatory States* address American interventions that employed both covert and more overt tactics to achieve stability and security in the Western Hemisphere. Guatemala remains the prototypical example of U.S. intervention, combining a Cold War environment, revolutionary nationalism, CIA operations, and the consolidation of ruthless and repressive military institutions. *Secret History* is the second edition of a work originally crafted when the author was a member of the CIA's history staff. It offers a detailed

account, drawn largely from the agency's files, of Operation PBSUCCESS. The new edition provides an appendix of twenty-one new documents, including several of the agency's postcoup assessments of conditions in Guatemala. Another addition is a new preface that briefly considers the influence of the Guatemalan operation on contemporary policies of regime change. But the most significant and compelling contribution of the preface and text to contemporary debates about Iraq is overwhelming evidence of ideological rigidity within the intelligence community, a rigidity that has consistently led to misreadings of events in countries that Washington targeted for intervention.

As does *Secret History, Predatory States* builds on the earlier work of its author, in this case on U.S. involvement in Operation Condor, the covert agreement among as many as six South American military regimes to create a transnational terror network to identify, seize, interrogate, torture, and in many cases murder opponents ranging from armed insurgents to political dissidents. This study makes abundantly clear that, beginning with an initial agreement between Chile and Argentina, Condor evolved into an effective killing machine. What is less clear is the extent of Washington's involvement in the development and activities of the Condor network.

Although McSherry does not suggest that the United States masterminded the creation of Condor, she does offer compelling evidence that Washington facilitated its emergence and functioning in a variety of ways. This influence originated with the United States' development of counterinsurgency techniques in postwar Europe. These techniques were refined and expanded in Vietnam, and then transmitted to Latin American militaries through the infamous School of the Americas and innumerable military assistance and training programs. When the Condor states began their operations, the Nixon administration, and specifically Henry Kissinger, made it clear that Washington would assume a strictly hands-off policy toward their machinations while facilitating their transnational reach by offering access to the United States' continental communications system housed in the Panama Canal Zone. However, a detailed analysis of U.S. involvement must await increased access to U.S. and Latin American archives, should this ever occur.

Although McSherry provides both a compelling account of Condor and strong arguments in regard to U.S. involvement, she engages less successfully some of the larger issues that the topic suggests. The study attributes the rise of military regimes and their security-state policies to the challenges resulting from popular mobilizations in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet this argument largely ignores that many of these mobilizations, such as that in Brazil, were not exceptionally radical and did not represent serious and immediate threats to the power of the state. A more meaningful avenue of explanation may be the evolving presence of industrial and

consumer-oriented multinational and national enterprises, with their increased sensitivity to even relatively minor disruptions of local social and economic networks. In addition, although McSherry asserts that she casts her study in terms of hegemonic analysis, her accounting of state-directed violence against civilian populations instead suggests a weakening of the hegemonic order in Latin American societies and of the multinational dominance of the United States. In the end, both *Secret History* and *Predatory States* offer chilling reminders that, behind the pursuit of corporate profits, cultural interactions, and the interplay of race and gender in shaping inter-American relations, there often lies the ruthless exercise of violence.

The six studies treated here focus primarily on the single issue of intervention but offer a representative sampling of the competing visions of inter-American relations now in play. They range from fairly conventional examinations of state-initiated military intervention to studies that expand not only the definition of intervention but also, more important, the methods used to explore such interactions in the Americas. Although diverse in approach, certain themes and shortcomings appear across a number of these books. One common view is that the actions of the United States in the Americas carry significance far beyond the Western Hemisphere, perhaps setting precedents for the second Gulf War and, more broadly, for the process of globalization. Although none of these works seeks to develop this topic to any great extent, their references to these larger issues suggest that scholars are laying the groundwork for new studies to examine the global implications of inter-American relations. At the same time, with the exception of Gobat and Neptune, these authors do not give prominence to Latin American actors responding to U.S. intervention and, in many instances, forcing Washington to adjust its policies to cope with local reactions. Whatever the approach, this aspect of inter-American relations is now an essential part of the field. Several of these books also deal with the unintentional democratizing effects of U.S. intervention, and again, Gobat and Neptune offer the most effective analyses of how this process unfolded. At the same time, all of the authors are fairly consistent in stressing the self-interested motives that drove U.S. intervention and the fact that U.S. policy makers have exhibited a striking lack of understanding of the societies on which they are acting. Even studies that stress issues like culture and gender recognize the continuing relevance of economic motivations and the importance, both domestically and internationally, of disproportionate power relations in understanding the history of the Americas.