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Jorge Swett
Chilean Navy

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U.S. Policies toward Latin America: Much Room for Much Improvement

Captain Jorge Swett, Chilean Navy

When viewed from south of your border, U.S. policies toward Latin America seem ill-defined—mere generalizations designed to address collectively all the Caribbean and Central American countries, even though each country harbors its individual problems. Countries such as mine, far from both Central America and the Caribbean, often find themselves covered by the same policies. In any event, the policies fail to recognize the differences in each country's history, difficulties, size and aspirations, and seem always to be changing in unpredictable directions. And ultimately, when implemented, as we have seen recently, these policies are frequently perceived as acts of intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Conversely, the U.S. populace is unable to understand what their country's interests in Latin America are that justify a close relation with that region. Drugs, debt, unstable democracies, inefficient economies, illegal immigration, military and communist dictatorships, and billions of dollars wasted in futile aid programs are the costs perceived.

I will attempt to explain the reasons behind the mutually negative perception each has of the other, and I will also propose steps that the United States can take to improve the effectiveness of its policy in this area.

U.S. National Interests, Objectives and Policies

The problem of defining a nation's interests, objectives and policies is, obviously, an issue for each country to resolve. Consideration should be given to allies and friendly nations, but clearly the United States is sovereign in defining what is best for the present and future well-being of its citizens. The task of defining the country's interests or changing their relative

Captain Swett is a 1966 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and holds a master's degree in electrical engineering and an electrical engineer's degree from the Naval Postgraduate School. He has served in various Chilean warships, including command of the *Elicura* and the *Casma*. Captain Swett hopes to go back to sea after finishing his tour in Newport as a research fellow at the Naval War College.

importance is given, by the Constitution, primarily to the executive branch of the government. As the government changes in its four-year cycle, so does the perception of the national interests and its derivatives.

Having these important foundations clearly defined, it should be a simple exercise to those in charge of foreign policy to observe the world and determine the realities, conditions, and historical trends that stand between the present situation and the one that is desired. Those in charge may then craft policies to circumvent or nullify adverse influences—the threats—and to enhance and foster the positive effects—the opportunities—of the environment. Rationality should play a major role in this process. The task of defining the foreign policy of each administration is likely to be time-consuming, but given clear directions as to what the interests and objectives are, it is only a matter of hard work and time before each administration generates its own. Or so one would like to believe.

Experience, however, has shown us differently. There is no consensus of what constitutes the realities, conditions and historical trends that should be considered. And even should they be agreed upon, there still remains the subjective evaluation of their impact on achieving the objective. This creates a never-ending debate within the administration, in Congress, and in public opinion. Personal values, roles of individuals or institutions, background, knowledge, interest in world affairs and so on form varying perceptions of what may be a threat or an opportunity. Furthermore, with time, perceptions change.

Eventually the concerned people do formulate what the national interest is, define the objectives, and decide upon the policies. The problem then arises on how to implement them. The world is too large and complex for only one foreign policy to include all the issues and regions that need to be addressed. If only one policy were defined, it would be either too general or too detailed to be of practical use. Therefore it is logical to formulate foreign policy according to the issues being addressed, and according to geographical areas. These areas should combine nations with common characteristics.

Is there a role for the other countries in the crafting of this process? It would appear that the answer is they have none. However, while they do not participate in the creation of policy, it is they who are most affected by it. The power and size of the United States often makes U.S. national interests, objectives and policies dominate how the other nations define their own interests, objectives and policies. Current U.S. policies toward Nicaragua, Colombia and El Salvador, for example, probably raise major considerations in each of these countries' determination of their own objectives and policies. Therefore, it is most important that the United States define and convey its policies clearly so that everyone in the international scene knows the position held by the United States.

U.S. Policy toward Latin America

I will apply the three steps just described—defining, implementing and communicating—to U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America in the last forty years. In the process I will identify the problems I see, which will help in understanding the reasons for the mutually negative perceptions I have mentioned.

Defining Policy. First we need to address the problem of “what are the U.S. objectives in Latin America.” President Reagan was the last president to state publicly his administration’s perceptions of what constituted U.S. national interest and major objectives.¹ The objectives, as defined by him, are: to maintain the security of the United States and its allies; to respond to the challenges of the global economy; to defend the cause of democracy, freedom and human rights throughout the world; to resolve peacefully disputes which affect U.S. interests in troubled regions of the world; and to build effective and friendly relations with all nations with whom there is a basis of shared concerns. It can be assumed that these objectives have not been changed by the present administration.

While clearly stated, these objectives provide only a beginning, since they are too general and all inclusive to be practical. Therefore, a survey for more specific goals is needed.

Depending on what you read or whom you ask, different objectives will be stated. Promoting democracy and human rights, encouraging market economies, and preventing communist expansion are commonly found in recent publications. Lars Schoultz² states, in my view, the best analysis on this subject. His thesis is that U.S. objectives in Latin America have been dominated by national security concerns. National security objectives, in turn, have been challenged by threats to stability. Stable, and the United States hopes, friendly governments in Latin America have been perceived as the best assurance in fulfilling the U.S. national interest of peace and prosperity. Therefore, stability has been the ultimate objective in the foreign policy of the United States toward Latin America.

And what have been the threats?

At the end of World War II, the United States was concerned with Soviet expansion in the world. In Latin America, growth of communism was perceived as the main threat to stability. “Communism caused instability, therefore, communism was the root of the problem.” Policies followed, such as the Rio Pact of 1947, the Organization of American States charter of 1948, and the revamping of the Inter-American Defense Board created during World War II. These policies generated a large U.S. presence in the armed forces of most Latin American countries through military assistance advisory

groups, military assistance programs, and training of Latin American military officers and men, primarily in counterinsurgency operations.

By the sixties, the perception that instability was a major threat to U.S. objectives in Latin America was still believed to be correct. The cause for it, however, was no longer clear. Scholars and politicians began to question the axiom that communism was the root of instability. They claimed that perhaps poverty was the real culprit. Poverty led to political mobilization and eventually to instability. Therefore, U.S. policies should strive to change the political and social structure that was preventing economic development. Policies followed, such as President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and more foreign aid.

Perhaps the failure of the Alliance for Progress to achieve its objectives of economic development and social reforms—a failure caused by both lack of interest in the United States following the death of President Kennedy and, in Latin America, the frequent mismanagement of the funds provided—or frustration with the lack of progress in improving the living conditions of the masses, led in the seventies to a new school of thought. It questioned the notion that U.S. objectives in Latin America should be dominated by national security concerns. Its followers argued that a national security threat did not exist, that stability should not be a concern. Instability was precisely what the region needed to break the oligarchies, military or civilian, that would never relinquish power by peaceful means. The human rights and pro democracy policies of President Carter can be cited as typical of this school of thought.

The process of establishing a foreign policy toward Latin America has been influenced by these changing perceptions of what the objectives and threats are. Today's policies (or lack of policies, as critics would contend), have elements of the three views just described. The first supported by conservatives, the second by moderates and the third by liberals. A lack of focus has resulted.

Implementing Policy. Let us turn our attention to the problem of implementing policy in Latin America. As previously mentioned, partitioning foreign policy by issues and by areas is the next logical step in dealing with the diversity of problems the United States has to face. Therefore, the geographical area of the world located below the U.S.-Mexican border has been termed Latin America, and policy has been created to handle U.S. relations with the governments of that region.

Two questions follow: first, what constitutes Latin America? and second, does this partition contribute to good policies?

To answer the first, Latin America is a name given to a loosely defined area that starts at the Rio Grande and ends at Cape Horn. It includes an area of about eight million square miles and a population of 360 million,

incorporating eighteen Spanish-speaking countries, plus Brazil, Haiti, six former British colonies, a Dutch colony, and a number of dependencies of France, Britain, the Netherlands and the United States.³ The majority of these nations share a common colonial past, with Spanish the common language and Catholicism the predominant religion. Most also share a tradition of unstable governments and modest economic development. Many other common characteristics could be cited to justify treating them as one homogeneous conglomerate.

While the similarities among these countries are perceived by most people in the United States, few are aware of the differences. Size, population, history, racial composition, economic development, and most important, proximity to the U.S. border make each country a different nation. Even countries neighboring each other, such as Brazil and Argentina, Peru and Chile, or Bolivia and Paraguay, have marked differences. These differences, in some instances, have been the root of bloody wars that have left suspicion and animosity in their relations today. Political and economic cooperation have been scarce; competition has been common.

Besides, the obvious differences in size and population, racial composition also tends to pull them apart. The original Spaniards of colonial days mixed with different large and sophisticated Indian cultures such as Aztecs, Mayas, or Incas, producing diverse racial mixtures. In some, the racial mix included blacks. Further immigration, especially from Europe in the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, has added to racial and cultural diversity.

Latin America, then, can be defined precisely only in geographical terms. To describe generally its cultural, social, economic or other attributes is difficult, since there are scarcely any two countries that can be treated similarly.

I can now answer the second question concerning implementation. The obvious answer is that the diversity among the countries does not contribute to defining a good common policy. The countries of Latin America are indeed different and *feel* different. They have become separate nations, that is, groups that share a common past and a desire to maintain their individuality in the future. It is no wonder that a single U.S. foreign policy toward the whole area does not fit any one country in particular. This helps to explain the Latin American criticisms. Most either feel left out or wrongly assimilated to policies that clearly do not fit their perceptions of themselves.

To some in the United States, the attempt to differentiate the countries of Latin America may seem trivial, since the facts show that the Latin American countries share most of the important attributes such as economic, social and political development (or underdevelopment). Though these are facts, facts alone do not count in foreign relations. Perceptions are just as important. If the United States wants its policies toward Latin America to

achieve the intended objectives, it must recognize the differences in each nation and adjust its policies accordingly.

Communicating Policy. Writing on the role of the United States in the Malvinas/Falklands War, David Lewis Feldmand blames the United States for Argentina's decision to go to war.⁴ He states that, as perceived by Argentina's rulers, U.S. policy toward their country led them to believe that the United States would stay neutral in the conflict. (Argentina at the time strongly supported President Reagan's policy toward Central America.) Their assumption turned out to be wrong. U.S. logistical assistance to Great Britain in that conflict was a major factor, albeit not the decisive one, in Argentina's defeat. Whether accurate or not, Feldmand's article does show that unclear signals of what U.S. policy objectives are can be just as damaging as having no policies at all.

Good communications regarding policy are a victim of the complex U.S. policy decision process. Latin American countries are accustomed to authoritarian and centralized governments. They assume that the U.S. government functions more or less in the same manner. That is, the executive branch runs foreign policy, with some contribution from the legislative branch and perhaps public opinion. Once a decision is made, they reason logically, the policy is implemented and everybody follows it.

But foreign policy in the United States does not conform to this process. The different perceptions of threats and opportunities, the permanent disputes between Congress and the President on foreign policy matters, the role of lobbyists, church groups, think tanks, labor unions, the news media, and even independent organizations or individuals, confuse the issues of what the policies are and who is in charge of them. Acts of individuals or organizations, such as financial aid to some labor union by the AFL-CIO or to a political party by the National Endowment for Democracy, are misinterpreted as official policies of the U.S. government, adding further to the confusion.

Latin America's lack of importance to the United States has spawned poor communications between them, a fact that cannot be contested. Just as with individuals, countries like to feel important and to be recognized as part of the society in which they live—in this case, the Western Community of Nations. Hence, diplomatic practice dictates that if a country or region is of secondary political, economic or strategic interest, the truth should be shrouded to soften the blow. I believe that while this may be good politics, it is bad policy, for it makes mutual relations frivolous and sows misunderstanding. As we have seen in the Malvinas/Falklands war, it can have, in addition, tragic results.

Most Latin American politicians, whether of the right, center or left, and almost all senior military officers, still believe that the main objective of U.S.-Latin American policy is maintaining stability at any cost. They believe this

because it was clearly stated to them in the fifties and early sixties when the United States actively pursued this objective. Since then, U.S. policies have not been as strongly supported as formerly and have been less precisely conveyed. Hence, a change in policy has not been clearly perceived in Latin America.

Improving U.S. Objectives and Policies toward Latin America

How does the United States repair this situation? The ideas I recommend call for rationality, in spite of the difficulties in using this approach. More rationality can, perhaps, help policy making and implementation as practiced in the real world.

The most important thing to be done is to prioritize U.S. objectives toward Latin America. Which objective is first in importance? President Reagan included all of them—political, security and economic—in his document. What are the opportunities and possible threats that stand in the way of achieving these objectives? With this information in hand, the U.S. government can decide which is first in importance, which is last, and so on. It will be nearly impossible to uncouple them, but it should be feasible to assign priorities, after which, effective and well-focused policies can be designed and implemented.

A brief look at the realities of Latin America reveals that a military threat no longer exists. As a source of strategic materials, alternative suppliers have removed its importance. Even the Panama Canal has diminished in strategic value. It is more important to the western countries of South America than it is to the United States. The situation in Central America is controlled and has never constituted, in my opinion, a military threat to U.S. security.

Politically, the countries of the region are more independent and pursue their own interests more than before. U.S. hegemony has dwindled, and everyone seems to accept this fact. The United States does pursue political objectives in its thrust toward freedom, democracy and the respect of human rights, but the violation of these standards cannot be judged as a vital threat to its national interests.

Things have also changed economically. Most countries are facing great economic and social difficulties. Their economies are in chaos. Relative to that in other regions, U.S. investment has declined. In 1985 it amounted to 13 percent of all U.S. foreign investment. In 1950 it had been 38 percent.⁵ As a market for U.S. exports, Latin America constituted 13.6 percent of the total in 1988, down from 18 percent in 1981. The United States imported from Latin America 11.7 percent of its total in 1988, down from 14.9 percent in 1981.⁶ Notwithstanding these figures, the United States has moved from a trade surplus of \$1.3 billion in 1981 to a trade deficit of \$9.9 billion in 1988. This fact stems from the needs of the Latin American countries to increase

their exports and reduce their imports to pay their large foreign debt. As recipients of massive loans from major U.S. European and Japanese banks, if they lose hope of being able to pay their debts, Latin American countries have the capacity to damage the U.S. and world economy by defaulting on their payments, a fact that should be given proper notice.

New threats have appeared in the last decade. Illegal immigration, especially from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America, is reaching the magnitude of a peaceful invasion of the United States. Poverty, in addition to strong U.S. demand, is behind the production of drugs or drug-related crops. Concerns in the exploitation of the Amazon region are viewed by environmental groups in the United States and Europe as a threat to world ecology and perhaps the planet's weather. Democracy in the region is being undermined by an economic base that cannot support its purported freedoms.

These new threats to U.S. objectives originate in Latin America's failure to develop economically. It is perhaps timely, then, to make clear the change in emphasis from security objectives to economic objectives and to focus in every way on the latter instead of on the former.

Sound economic practices should be valued and rewarded just as strongly as today's policies value and reward democracy and respect for human rights. Moreover, a free market model of economic development should be clearly differentiated from democracy as a form of government. Both should be stressed, and on equal terms, as U.S. objectives.

Economic development through foreign aid, such as the Alliance for Progress, has failed. If repeated, it will fail again. What must be done has to be done by the countries themselves. For years most have had socialist-type economies. As Hernando de Soto points out, mercantilism is practiced in much of Latin America, with all its consequences, without opposition, internal or external. The inefficiencies implicit in the management of the economies of these countries by such practices, should be viewed as contrary to U.S. objectives.⁷

Once the United States defines its policies, it should implement them in a form that fits the different countries. The very concept of a "Latin American" policy is inadequate. Policies toward Mexico should address Mexico's problems with the United States. If they are to work, policies toward Brazil will have little in common with those toward Costa Rica or Honduras. If groups are to be formed, issues, and not primarily geography, should drive their formation as targets of a policy. Happily, just such an approach has been used lately. For example, the drug problem forced the United States to identify a special policy for Colombia, Peru and Bolivia (and to christen the group "The Andean Countries"). Similarly, the debt issues have been handled by the banks, not by the government, on a case-by-case policy. The result has been highly effective for the banks (but, alas, to the detriment of the debtor countries).

The problem of improving communications is difficult to solve. The confusing U.S. system of government will not change. The public and the news media will continue to participate in policy making and in some cases will intervene directly in its implementation, sometimes for and sometimes against the U.S. government's position. A similar judgment can be made of the forms of governments, institutions and traditions of the countries of Latin America. A mutual educational process through exchanges and visits can be of some help. Good embassies, staffed with persons who can convey to their governments the intricacies of the other countries' internal politics, would also contribute.

Above all, a sense of respect, tolerance and understanding of the institutions and values of each other has to be bred and nourished into every level of this old and often ill-tempered relationship. It is worthwhile to change our mutual perceptions from negative to positive. After all, our relationships are permanent.

Notes

1. President Reagan's Second Report to Congress on National Security Strategy as printed in *National Security Strategy of the United States*, January 1988, pp. 1-13.
2. Lars Schoultz, *National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 308-330.
3. Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline, *Latin American Politics and Development*, 2nd ed., (Boulder: Westview, 1985), p. 5.
4. David Lewis Feldmand, "The United States Role in the Malvinas Crisis, 1982: Misguidance and Misperception in Argentina's Decision to go to War," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Summer 1985, p. 1.
5. Abraham E. Lowenthal, "Rethinking US Interests in the Western Hemisphere," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Spring 1987, p. 7.
6. *Direction of Trade Statistic*, IMF, Washington, D.C., May 1989.
7. Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).



. . . a sustained familiarity with the international relations of the day, as well as an historical acquaintance with the political history of the past three centuries, is essential to an officer's equipment for such duties.

Naval Strategy

A. T. Mahan (1911)

Little, Brown (1918), p. 375