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Thomas M. Bader

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In the last two decades the Latin American military has undergone dramatic changes in its social and economic outlook. It has been transformed by an influx of young and reform-minded officers from a rigid defender of the social and economic status quo to a significant vehicle of social progress and national feeling. It no longer has a monolithic political outlook, but is divided by differing factions holding differing economic and political sympathies.

SWORDS AND PLOWSHARES

An article prepared

by

Lieutenant Commander Thomas M. Bader, U.S. Coast Guard Reserve

"Cactus, chaos and caudillos:" this awkwardly alliterative phrase unfortunately characterizes the views of many North Americans towards their neighbors south of the Rio Grande. With the simplicity born of limited study and restricted experience, many good and earnest citizens of the United States regard the vast continent and one-half of Latin America as symbolized by the resting peon, as plagued by unremitting political and economic uncertainty, and as perverted by local military bosses who hold power through the brutality of armed gangs of irregular militia. Equally simplistic and inaccurate are those government leaders who look at Latin America only as an area to be protected from international communism and who aver that such protection can be assured easily through the sale of arms and the extension of professional training to a staunchly conservative stabilizing force of the Latin American military.

The general line officer of the armed services of the United States often

shares such biases and misconceptions. Recalling past conflicts and present strife, joining in NATO exercises and SEATO study groups, that officer-in-abstract ignores the diversity of the Latin American military establishment and fails to recognize that parts of that military actually are in the vanguard of those who call for broad-based social and economic reform. Contrary to common opinion, the armed forces of Latin America often act as catalysts for change which might "bleed off" pressures for revolution and thus serve to check effectively the spread of international communism even while improving the life of the general man of Latin America. The purpose of this essay is to discuss broadly the changing patterns of the Latin American military, to interpret certain themes developing within those armed forces, and to suggest some questions about the future role of our Latin American peers.

A prime characteristic of the Latin American military is that it plays a more significant domestic role than it does on

the stage of international relations. Indeed, those armed forces have proven so active in national functions that their role as the defenders of the national territory has been of only secondary importance. The military often intervenes directly in domestic politics or dominates local patterns as the ultimate arbiter of disputes. That military could be expected to exert little influence in a world conflict should the cold war suddenly heat up, but a clear domestic focus does not detract from the importance of those forces: on the contrary, it enhances it.

Until World War II the Latin American military were singularly unimportant in shaping the direction of the evolution of their societies. Although personalistic armies could insure political success, conservative generals dedicated the military to the preservation of the economic and social status quo. Thus, militarily occasioned change meant no mutation in the basic nature of the society. Only with the years of the Second World War did the armed forces of Latin America alter their concept of responsibility to their particular nations. Some middle-grade officers came to view the military as a sociorevolutionary force, and a pattern evolved anticipating the route to be followed by later Nassers and Kassems throughout the world.¹ Components of the armed forces thus extended support to Col. Juan Domingo Perón (Argentina, 1943), Maj. Gualberto Villaroel (Bolivia, 1943), Juan Arévalo (Guatemala, 1944), José María Velasco Ibarra (Ecuador, 1944), and many of the other social reform governments which arose during those exciting and confusing years.²

Despite such support, the combination of a postwar depression, limited administrative experience, and the profound dislocations always attendant upon efforts to remake society combined to spell the doom of the too early revolutionary movements. During the

later forties and the fifties, the political pendulum swung back to mark a resurgence of conservative leadership and a reaffirmation, by the senior officers of the military, of their support for the older ruling elites.³

The restored harmony between the senior military and the political-economic leadership may be explained in terms of historic patterns and familial relations. Often the officers were relatives of administrative elite and thus tended to cooperate closely with the government of the status quo.⁴ Such cooperation led some analysts to the view that the armed forces returned en masse to the position as a monolithic power impeding social change and supporting a ruling clique. Other scholars, more perceptive, noted that a significant part of the military "is made up of young officers hiding their time to identify themselves with the social revolution."⁵ The swing of the leadership of the armed forces back to general support of the conservative right must not obscure the fact that the character of the Latin American military had changed markedly over the previous two or three decades. The military had moved from a basically monolithic ideological past to evolve into a force composed of differing factions holding conflicting social views and political sympathies. Today some of the officer corps favor a "hard line" (*linea dura*) approach, averring that the role of the military is to keep order and to suppress social and political change which might overthrow the ruling elite and allow for the spread of communism; others call for sweeping reforms so as to remake their societies, and they will romance even with international communism if they see that such an "affair" could catalyze desired reforms.

The military factionalism now present in Latin America is important in at least two primary senses. First; such conflicting views can negate U.S. military aid programs to Latin America as

the conflict suggests the possibility of intramilitary strife. The disparate role interpretation by those armed forces thus might serve as a specific threat to the security interests of the United States within Latin America.⁶ Second; the last several decades have seen the marked increase of military importance in the countries of Latin America. As the people of the particular nations to our south become more aware of their national identity and as the officers of the armed forces are being drawn increasingly from the middle and the lower classes, the Latin American military—almost by default—has become the depository of xenophobic nationalism and the focal point of a “national image.”⁷ The more militant reformist officers encouraged such identification by creating nationally oriented clubs such as Los Dragones Verdes (Argentina), RADEPA (Razón de Patria—Bolivia), and PUMAS (Por un mañana auspicioso—Chile).

Underlying the patina of generally conservative senior military, there are a rising number of militant, well-trained, reform-minded junior officers. As a young woman, a professor of history at a University in Rio de Janeiro, commented: “Today the younger officers understand the problems of the masses from having experienced them.”⁸ A student of the Latin American military added: “The younger officers, the decisionmakers of the coming decade, . . . will be far more sympathetic than the present generation of senior officers to the demands of the historically oppressed masses.”⁹ The broadened base of the Latin American military also encourages social mobility, dominates regionalism, and stimulates a profound metamorphosis of the specific nations within which they work. Lt. Gen. Alva R. Fitch understood this when, as Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, he reported to a Committee of Congress in 1965:

The change in the composition and attitudes of the Latin American armed forces, often manifested publicly by beneficent civic action projects, have in turn created increased public support and respect for the military in most countries.¹⁰

Lieutenant General Fitch’s comment reminds us that the Latin American military bear both swords and plowshares. Military components are building roads, setting up hospitals, and fulfilling many other similar civic functions. Until his recent death, Gen. Rene Barrientos, the President of landlocked Bolivia, saw his army constructing bridges, maintaining roads, and running small service industries such as sawmills. In Peru, six army battalions are pushing penetration

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Lt. Comdr. Thomas M. Bader, U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, has exceptional qualifications for writing an article dealing with Latin America. He has been awarded an M.A. and a Ph.D. degree from UCLA in Latin American history and has taught for 5 years at the college and university level. He is also a graduate of the Centro de Estudios Americanos de la Universidad de Chile and has traveled extensively in Latin America. This travel and professional preparation have given Lieutenant Commander Bader an excellent opportunity to observe the changing social and economic currents of Latin America and the effects that these have had upon the military establishments of the various Latin American states. As his article reveals, it is vital that we understand these currents and their significance.

Lieutenant Commander Bader is currently the chairman of the Department of History at San Fernando State College, Calif., is the Executive Officer of the U.S. Coast Guard Vessel Augmentation Unit at Santa Monica, Calif., and is a recent graduate of the Naval War College correspondence course, National and International Security Organization.

roads across the rugged Andes to the rich fecundity of that country's interior, while other military groups teach in trade schools which train the generally unskilled recruits of Peru's army. The Brazilian military is considered by many to be without peer in the extent and diversity of its civic programs. Four full battalions are at work currently in the arid and parlous Northeast; an equal number labor in the South; while even the dank Amazonian waterways carry military boats bringing medicine and supplies to the jungle Indians of the interior.¹¹

Further listing of the many social and economic programs of the Latin American military would be of little value here. Yet at least one additional aspect of such programs must be noted: the Government of the United States, through its military representatives in the area, often provides both direct and indirect aid to such work. The U.S. Navy, as an example, has two training groups, Mobile Construction Battalions (MCB's) assisted by Seabee Technical Assistance Teams (STAT's), at work within Latin America. Such groups have provided aid for projects as diverse as:

- (1) The construction of a naval academy at Salinas, Ecuador;
- (2) The building of floating bridges in flooded areas of Haiti;
- (3) The completion of a long-delayed pier facility at Port-au-Prince;
- (4) The restructuring of breakwaters and waterfront supports at Talcahuano, Chile; and,
- (5) The building of a school for auto mechanics in the Dominican Republic.¹²

Specifically, therefore, a review of the many roles filled by the military man of Latin America can prove of great value to the line officer of the Armed Forces of the United States. Assignment to a MAP (the Sword) or to a MCB (the Plowshare) would prove either profoundly exasperating or professionally rewarding; preparatory reading and study can increase the probability of the latter.

Broadly, an understanding of the views of the officer rising within the ranks of the Latin American military can explain the actions of military governments such as that which recently has taken control of the Republic of Peru.¹³ That officer often is a super-patriot, disassociated from the old-line elites, favoring state or military intervention in industrial economy and programs of social welfare. He is a man strongly motivated professionally and ideologically, and his fervent loyalty to his nation may result in disloyalty to particular incumbent governments which he regards as either incompetent or dangerous to the nation's future. Such themes and motivations help to explain the rise to power and authority of the military officer in countries as important and diverse as: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru. They illustrate also the reasons behind his continued importance in Ecuador, Panama, and the majority of the countries of Central America. This officer, thus, is a complex and important figure who looms increasingly large on the horizon of Latin America. In part a peer, he merits our respect; in part unique, he demands our attention!

FOOTNOTES

1. Robert A. Potash, "The Changing Role of the Military in Argentina," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, October 1961, p. 574; L.N. McAlister, "Civil Military Relations in Latin America," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, July 1961, p. 345. Any sweeping generalities about the Latin American military invites exceptions. For a study of one of the few early social-military movements see Herbert S. Klein, "David Toro and the Establishment of Military Socialism in Bolivia." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, February 1965, p. 25-52.

2. Cf. Edwin Lieuwen, "The Military: a Revolutionary Force," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1961, p. 31-33. See also Olive Holmes, "Army Challenges in Latin America," *Foreign Policy Reports*, 1 December 1949, p. 166-175.

3. As an example of this "restoration," see Felipe Cossio del Pomar, "Oligarquía y militarismo en el Perú," *Cuadernos*, February 1962, p. 27-31.

4. In 1962 the Navy of Venezuela had six admirals; three of these either were of the Larrazabal family or had married into that family. The Tahernilla family dominated the military which supported the Batista government in Cuba. John J. Johnson, *The Military and Society in Latin America* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1964), p. 111-121.

5. Edwin Lieuwen, "The Changing Role of the Military in Latin America," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, October 1961, p. 566.

6. Edwin Lieuwen, *The United States and the Challenge to Security in Latin America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 70.

7. Johnson, p. 142.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 243. See also K.H. Silvert, "Political Universes in Latin America," *American Universities Field Staff Reports*, December 1961, p. 10.

10. U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Hearings (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1965), p. 9; Victor Alba, *Nationalists without Nations: the Oligarchy versus the People in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 209, supports this view and argues further that early social revolutionaries, disillusioned by the failures of the forties and the fifties, are turning to the military technocrats to effect changes within their societies.

11. Williard F. Barber and C. Neale Ronning, *Internal Security and Military Power: Counterinsurgency and Civic Action in Latin America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 69, 190, 195. For a general overview of the civic action programs see also *ibid.*, p. 119-134. Alba, p. 98, disagrees with the positive descriptions of the Brazilian military. He avers that that country's armed force achieves egotistic ends and gains "copious purchases of the playthings of war" by forcing the government to acquiesce to all of the military demands. Alba's dissent, however, reaffirms the central thesis of this essay: that of great diversity existing with the Latin American military.

12. Barber, p. 160.

13. A particularly fine study of the historic roots and recent developments of the diplomatic-economic strife currently darkening relations between the United States and the Republic of Peru is that by Richard N. Goodwin, "Letter from Peru," *The New Yorker*, 17 May 1969, p. 41-109.

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