The Camel Not in the Koran

THE ARGENTINE WRITER Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that the lack of camels in the Koran proves its Middle Eastern provenance: only a native author, he explained, could have so taken the animal for granted as not to mention it. Perhaps a similar familiarity explains the absence of Latin America in recent discussions about the United States and its empire. Though Latin America has played an indispensable role in the rise of the United States to global power, it elicits little curiosity from its neighbor to the north. "Latin America doesn't matter," Richard Nixon advised a young Donald Rumsfeld, who was casting about for career opportunities. "Long as we've been in it, people don't give one damn about Latin America."[1] Likewise today. In their search for historical precedents for our current imperial moment, intellectuals invoke postwar reconstructions of Germany and Japan, ancient Rome and nineteenth-century Britain but consistently ignore the one place where the United States has projected its influence for more than

two centuries. "People don't give one shit" about the place, Nixon said.[2]

Were it not for Borges's insight, this studied indifference to Latin America would seem ironic, for the region has long served as a workshop of empire, the place where the United States elaborated tactics of extraterritorial administration and acquired its conception of itself as an empire like no other before it. The Western Hemisphere was to be the staging ground for a new "empire for liberty," a phrase used by Thomas Jefferson specifically in reference to Spanish Florida and Cuba. Unlike European empires, ours was supposed to entail a concert of equal, sovereign democratic American republics, with shared interests and values, led but not dominated by the United States—a conception of empire that remains Washington's guiding vision.

The same direction of influence is evident in any number of examples. The United States's engagement with the developing world after World War II, for instance, is often viewed as an extension of its postwar policies in Europe and Japan, yet that view has it exactly backwards. Washington's first attempts, in fact, to restructure another country's economy took place in the developing world—in Mexico in the years after the American Civil War and in Cuba following the Spanish-American War. "We should do for Europe on a large scale," remarked the U.S. ambassador to England in 1914, "essentially what we did for Cuba on a small scale and thereby usher in a new era of human history." Likewise, most discussions of George W. Bush's foreign policy focus on the supposed innovation of a small group of neoconservative intellectuals in asserting the right to unilateral preemptive military action both to defend national security and to advance American ideals. But neither the neocons' dire view of a crisis-ridden world that justifies the use of unilateral and brutal American military power nor their utopian vision of the same world made whole and happy by that power is new. Both have been fully in operation in Washington's approach to Latin America for over a

century. The history of the United States in Latin America is cluttered with "preemptive" interventions that even the most stalwart champions of U.S. hegemony have trouble defending.

From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the U.S. military sharpened its fighting skills and developed its modern-day organizational structure largely in constant conflict with Latin America—in its drive west when it occupied Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century and took more than half of that country's national territory. And in its push south: by 1930, Washington had sent gunboats into Latin American ports over six thousand times, invaded Cuba, Mexico (again), Guatemala, and Honduras, fought protracted guerrilla wars in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti, annexed Puerto Rico, and taken a piece of Colombia to create both the Panamanian nation and the Panama Canal. For their part, American corporations and financial houses came to dominate the economies of Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America, as well as large parts of South America, apprenticing themselves in overseas expansion before they headed elsewhere, to Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Yet Latin America did more than serve as a staging ground for the United States's early push toward empire. The region provided a school where foreign policy officials and intellectuals could learn to apply what political scientists like to call "soft power"—that is, the spread of America's authority through nonmilitary means, through commerce, cultural exchange, and multilateral cooperation.[3]

At first, the United States proved a reluctant student. It took decades of mounting Latin American anti-imperialist resistance, including armed resistance, to force Washington to abandon its militarism. But abandon it it finally did, at least for a short time. In the early 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt promised that henceforth the United States would be a "good neighbor," that it would recognize the absolute sovereignty of individual nations, renounce its right to engage in unilateral interventions, and make concessions to economic nationalists. Rather than weaken U.S. influence in the Western

Hemisphere, this newfound moderation in fact institutionalized Washington's authority, drawing Latin American republics tighter into its political, economic, and cultural orbit through a series of multilateral treaties and regional organizations. The Good Neighbor policy was the model for the European and Asian alliance system, providing a blueprint for America's "empire by invitation," as one historian famously described Washington's rise to unprecedented heights of world power.[4]

But even as Washington was working out the contours of its kinder, gentler empire in postwar Western Europe and Japan, back in the birthplace of American soft power it was rearming. Latin America once again became a school where the United States studied how to execute imperial violence through proxies. After World War II, in the name of containing Communism, the United States, mostly through the actions of local allies, executed or encouraged coups in, among other places, Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina and patronized a brutal mercenary war in Nicaragua. Latin America became a laboratory for counterinsurgency, as military officials and covert operators applied insights learned in the region to Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. By the end of the Cold War, Latin American security forces trained, funded, equipped, and incited by Washington had executed a reign of bloody terror—hundreds of thousands killed, an equal number tortured, millions driven into exile—from which the region has yet to fully recover.

This reign of terror has had consequences more far-reaching than the damage done to Latin America itself, for it was this rehabilitation of hard power that directly influenced America's latest episode of imperial overreach in the wake of 9/11.

It is often noted in passing that a number of the current administration's officials, advisers, and hangers-on are veterans of Ronald Reagan's Central American policy in the 1980s, which included the patronage of anti-Communist governments in El Salvador and

Guatemala and anti-Communist insurgents in Nicaragua. The list includes Elliott Abrams, Bush's current deputy national security adviser in charge of promoting democracy throughout the world; John Negroponte, former U.N. ambassador, envoy to Iraq, and now intelligence czar; Otto Reich, secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere during Bush's first term; and Robert Kagan, an ardent advocate of U.S. global hegemony. John Poindexter, convicted of lying to Congress, conspiracy, and destroying evidence in the Iran-Contra scandal during his tenure as Reagan's national security adviser, was appointed by Rumsfeld to oversee the Pentagon's stillborn Total Information Awareness program. John Bolton, ambassador to the United Nations and an arch-unilateralist, served as Reagan's point man in the Justice Department to stonewall investigations into Iran-Contra.[5]

Yet the links between the current Bush administration's revolution in foreign policy and Reagan's hard line in Central America are even more profound than the simple recycling of personnel. It was Central America, and Latin America more broadly, where an insurgent New Right first coalesced, as conservative activists used the region to respond to the crisis of the 1970s, a crisis provoked not only by America's defeat in Vietnam but by a deep economic recession and a culture of skeptical antimilitarism and political dissent that spread in the war's wake. Indeed, Reagan's Central American wars can best be understood as a dress rehearsal for what is going on now in the Middle East. It was in these wars where the coalition made up of neoconservatives, Christian evangelicals, free marketers, and nationalists that today stands behind George W. Bush's expansive foreign policy first came together. There they had near free rein to bring the full power of the United States against a much weaker enemy in order to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam—and, in so doing, begin the transformation of America's foreign policy and domestic culture.

A critical element of that transformation entailed shifting the rationale of American diplomacy away from containment to rollback,

from one primarily justified in terms of national defense to one charged with advancing what Bush likes to call a "global democratic revolution." The domestic fight over how to respond to revolutionary nationalism in Central America allowed conservative ideologues to remoralize both American diplomacy and capitalism, to counteract the cynicism that had seeped into both popular culture and the political establishment regarding the deployment of U.S. power in the world. Thus they pushed the Republican Party away from its foreign policy pragmatism to the idealism that now defines the "war on terror" as a world crusade of free-market nation building.

At the same time, the conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala allowed New Right militarists to find ways to bypass the restrictions enacted by Congress and the courts in the wake of Vietnam that limited the executive branch's ability to fight wars, conduct covert operations, and carry out domestic surveillance of political activists. The Reagan White House perfected new techniques to manipulate the media, Congress, and public opinion while at the same time reempowering domestic law enforcement agencies to monitor and harass political dissidents. These techniques, as we shall see, prefigured initiatives now found in the PR campaign to build support for the war in Iraq and in the Patriot Act, reinvigorating the national security state in ways that resonate to this day. The Central American wars also provided the New Christian Right its first extensive experience in foreign affairs, as the White House mobilized evangelical activists in order to neutralize domestic opponents of a belligerent foreign policy. It was here where New Right Christian theologians first joined with secular nationalists to elaborate an ethical justification for a rejuvenated militarism.

In other words, it was in Central America where the Republican Party first combined the three elements that give today's imperialism its moral force: punitive idealism, free-market absolutism, and right-wing Christian mobilization. The first justified a belligerent diplomacy not just for the sake of national security but to advance

"freedom." The second sanctified property rights and the unencumbered free market as the moral core of the freedom it was America's duty to export. The third backed up these ideals with social power, as the Republican Party learned how to channel the passions of its evangelical base into the international arena.

To focus, therefore, exclusively on neoconservative intellectuals, as much of the commentary attempting to identify the origins of the new imperialism does, deflects attention away from the long history of American expansion. The intellectual architects of the Bush Doctrine are but part of a larger resurgence of nationalist militarism, serving as the ideologues of an American revanchism fired by a lethal combination of humiliation in Vietnam and vindication in the Cold War, of which Central America was the tragic endgame.

After an opening chapter that makes the case for Latin America's role in the formation of the U.S. empire, the rest of this book explores the importance of the region to the consolidation of what could be called a new, revolutionary imperialism. Taken each on their own, the ideas, tactics, politics, and economics that have driven Bush's global policy are not original. An interventionist military posture, belief that America has a special role to play in world history, cynical realpolitik, vengeful nationalism, and free-market capitalism have all driven U.S. diplomacy in one form or another for nearly two centuries. But what is new is how potent these elements have become and how tightly they are bound to the ambitions of America's domestic ruling conservative coalition—a coalition that despite its power and influence paints itself as persecuted, at odds not just with much of the world but with modern life itself.[6] The book goes on to explore the intellectual reorientation of American diplomacy in the wake of Vietnam and the increasing willingness of militarists to champion human rights, nation building, and democratic reform. The third chapter considers how the rehabilitation of unconventional warfare doctrine in El Salvador and

Nicaragua by militarists in and around the Reagan White House laid the groundwork for today's offensive military posture. Here, the human costs of this resurgence of militarism will be addressed. In the many tributes that followed Reagan's death, pundits enjoyed repeating Margaret Thatcher's comment that Reagan won the Cold War "without firing a shot." The crescendo of carnage that overwhelmed Central America in the 1980s not only gives the lie to such a legacy but highlights the inescapable violence of empire. The fourth chapter turns to the imperial home front, examining how the Reagan administration first confronted and then began to solve the domestic crisis of authority generated by Vietnam and Watergate. It also argues that Reagan's Central American policy served as a crucible that forged the coalition that today stands behind George W. Bush. Chapter 5 is concerned with the economics of empire, how the financial contraction of the 1970s provided an opportunity for the avatars of free-market orthodoxy—the true core of the Bush Doctrine—to join with other constituencies of the ascendant New Right, inaugurating first in Chile and then throughout Latin America a new, brutally competitive global economy.

The last chapter tallies the score of the new imperialism in Latin America. Celebrated by Bill Clinton, and now Bush, as a model of what the United States hopes to accomplish in the rest of the world, Latin America continues to be gripped by unrelenting poverty and periodic political instability, as the promise of living under a benevolent American imperium has failed to materialize. As a result, new political movements and antagonists have emerged to contest the terms of United States–promoted corporate globalization, calling for increased regional integration to offset the power of the United States and more social spending to alleviate Latin American inequality. With little to offer the region in terms of development except the increasingly hollow promises of free trade, Washington is responding to these and similar challenges by once again militarizing hemispheric relations, with all dissent now set in the crosshairs of the "global war on terror."

The history of Latin America, a region that long bore the brunt of the kind of righteous violence enshrined in the Bush Doctrine, has much to say about Washington's current drive toward global hegemony, particularly on how its ideologues have come to believe that American power itself is without limits. More ominously, though, it points to where we may wind up if we continue down this path.