

# Limits of Influence

## Creating Security Forces in Latin America

By RICHARD L. MILLETT

**F**rom 1898 to 1934, the United States created, trained, and equipped small military/constabulary forces for five Latin American countries: Cuba, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. Each force was expected to provide virtually all aspects of the nation's security, was designed to be apolitical, and was meant to reduce both direct costs and opportunities for corruption. It was further hoped, if not expected, that these forces would provide the stability needed to avoid future U.S. armed interventions.<sup>1</sup>

The forces thus created, far from becoming supporters of democratic stability, spawned predatory dictatorships. The United States thus found itself intervening again—twice with military force in Haiti and once in the Dominican Republic, as well as one major and several minor interventions in Panama, several limited interventions in Cuba (plus the indirect efforts of the Bay of Pigs operation), and indirectly in Nicaragua via the Contra project. In all but the Dominican Republic, the created forces were destroyed, by Marxist revolutionaries in Cuba and Nicaragua and by U.S. military intervention in Haiti and Panama. The force's survival in the Dominican Republic may be due to American intervention there in 1965. In Panama, and to an extent in Haiti, the United States found itself once again helping create new security forces from the wreckage of previous institutions.

Today, Washington is attempting to create indigenous security forces in Iraq



U.S. Army South (Kaye Ritchey)

**Soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Caribbean Battalion conducting riot control training in Dominican Republic**

and Afghanistan. Again, the old forces were dismantled by U.S. military intervention, creating a security vacuum and contributing to a climate of lawlessness. Standing up the new forces has been much more difficult and time-consuming than anticipated, and results have been mixed at best. Under such circumstances, revisiting the experiences in the Caribbean Basin offers insights into the pitfalls and prospects of such efforts.

The sorry history of these earlier attempts illustrates the problems of combining police and military functions, the obstacles to reshaping another nation's political and social environment, the dilemma of making policies sustainable and consistent, and the limits on exporting both doctrine and values. In sum, these are classic illustrations of the limits of influence.

### Lessons on Limits

Before beginning this analysis, it should be noted that while the created forces rarely moderated and frequently exacerbated the

political/social/economic problems of these weak states, they were by no means the only source of such problems. Like Iraq and Afghanistan, these countries lacked a real heritage of democratic rule, and civil society was feeble and deeply divided. Replacing military governments with civilian dictatorships, such as that of the Duvaliers in Haiti or with Marxist authoritarians such as Fidel Castro in Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, did nothing to provide either security or freedom. Establishing functioning democratic structures requires more than good intentions, better trained militaries, and new constitutions.

*Lesson One.* Technology transfers but values do not. It is easier to teach someone how to fire a weapon than when to fire it. U.S. efforts were relatively successful in modernizing forces, as well as in increasing both their combat and internal security capacities. But efforts to implant political-military doctrines were generally futile. Armies quickly adapted the new training and technology to domestic norms and values. Authoritarian systems became more efficient and often more repressive, not more democratic.

*Lesson Two.* Using the military in the role of police is always a bad idea, although

**Richard L. Millett is a specialist on the role of the United States in the Caribbean Basin. He retired as a Professor of History and head of Latin American Studies at Southern Illinois University, and is co-editor of *Beyond Praetorianism* and *The Restless Caribbean: Changing Patterns of International Relations*.**

Dominican special forces receive marksmanship training, Exercise *Tradewinds '04*



U.S. Army South (Keve Richey)

Iraqi police officer from public order brigade patrolling in Baghdad



55<sup>th</sup> Signal Company (Teddy Wade)

sometimes it may be an even worse idea *not* to. In creating these forces, it was thought that placing police under central control, incorporating them into the military, would serve numerous purposes: reduce expenses, give the military a continuing and credible mission, curb political manipulation, and reduce corruption. But what it did, in fact, was to centralize authority further, eliminating local controls over, or ties with, police forces. Indeed, in some cases, individuals were deliberately assigned to areas where they had no local ties to prevent any sympathy with the population. In other cases, local leaders formed their own paramilitary forces outside official state control. With military and police

officers graduating from the same institutions and belonging to a united officer corps, it was common to assign those of less ability (and perhaps fewer moral scruples) to police duty, further undermining police functions. Order took precedence over justice, control was more important than free speech or a free press, and protecting privilege—not individual rights—was the priority.

*Lesson Three.* Efforts to change a society by altering one institution never produce the desired effect and inevitably bring undesired effects. Trying to change police and other internal security forces without dealing with the massive problems of the broader administration of justice, such as legal systems, courts,

and traditional caste and class impunity, only exacerbates existing problems. When there is no effective rule of law, the police do not function in a democratic manner. When a society is dominated by family, class, and caste divisions, the security forces incorporate and maintain these divisions.

*Lesson Four.* Language skills (or the lack thereof) and racial/ethnic prejudices on the part of the occupying power have a major impact. Knowing both the denotations and the connotations of a language is vital. Moreover, in Latin America, knowing that “loyalty and subservience to the state” is very different than loyalty and subservience to the government or the people is extremely important. The Latin tradition is that of the *conquistadores*, not the U.S. militia tradition. Loyalty is given to one’s immediate commander and then to the institution, not to the government or constitution at large. Keys to knowing both the possibilities and limits of influence

---

*when a society is dominated by family, class, and caste divisions, the security forces incorporate and maintain these divisions*

---

include understanding the lack of words for *compromise* or *accountability*; understanding the meaning of addressing a superior as *mi coronel*; knowing why, in Spanish, instead of being disappointed one is deceived or betrayed; and understanding such concepts as *personalismo* (loyalty to individuals rather than institutions). Furthermore, words for such concepts as rule of law are largely absent in Arabic and in the various languages of Afghanistan.

Racial prejudice was both common and generally accepted in the United States in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which had a strong impact in places such as Haiti. It produced paternalism, which is a willingness to set much lower standards for and accept poor conduct by nationals of all ranks. The ultimate example was the court martial by the Marines of a Dominican lieutenant, Rafael Trujillo, who was accused of multiple counts of rape and extortion. Despite overwhelming evidence against him, not only was he acquitted, but also the case had no impact on his military career.<sup>2</sup> As a result, when the United States withdrew forces, Trujillo rapidly took over the army and eventually the nation, becoming one of the most brutal and corrupt dictators in Latin American history.

*Lesson Five.* Influence rarely survives withdrawal. Power and culture overcome ideology, and once foreign trainers lose direct authority, they lose much of their influence. In the past, to exercise authority effectively usually meant operating as a *caudillo*, a *cacique*, or a traditional *jefe* (boss or chief). But once the trainer was no longer in that position, the authority passed to his national successor, who was a product of the traditional, not the imported, culture.

Short-term adaptations to create an effective force often undermine long-range policy goals concerning the nature and political orientation of the institution. The officers assigned to creating these forces often understood this and at times attempted to communicate it to Washington, but without success.<sup>3</sup>

*Lesson Six.* Secondary issues in the creation and training process often become major issues once command is transferred to national authorities. Intelligence is a key example. Under American control, intelligence operated largely as a tactical military tool. Focus was on the issues of collection and evaluation more than utilization. When American forces withdrew, the newly created militaries

retained control over all domestic and foreign intelligence and used it to protect the military institution and perpetuate governments in power. Internal dissent rather than foreign threats became the primary focus. Leaving behind a structure where all intelligence, both foreign and domestic, was administered by the

---

*leaving a structure where all intelligence, both foreign and domestic, was administered by the military inevitably made intelligence an instrument of political control and repression*

---

military inevitably made intelligence an instrument of political control and repression.

American officers assigned to these missions, through no fault of their own, were rarely prepared for the cultural and political obstacles they encountered. Language skills were often neglected, selection was based more on institutional values than capability for the mission, and technical skills were generally placed above human skills. As a result, those involved frequently wished to finish tasks as quickly as possible to return to something they saw as more important. What is remarkable is how well most officers and enlisted personnel functioned while assigned to these missions. They often developed a strong rapport with the nationals they were training and leading and, while in command, kept abuses of power under relative control. But they were unable to leave behind any structure that would curb these tendencies once they departed.

Finally, communications between those making policies in Washington and those trying to carry them out in the field were poor. Directives arrived quickly and forcefully, while reactions, if transmitted at all, were delayed, rerouted, criticized, and ignored. Those doing the training quickly learned that questioning means and resources, much less objectives, could be career-threatening. Under such circumstances, “not on my watch” became an operative slogan, along with preparing excuses for ultimate failure, such as “to really do the job would require our presence here for at least two generations.”

There are substantial limits on influence when trying to develop a military force in another culture. The more ambitious the

goals of such a project—the more radical the transformation envisioned—the more likely it is not only that the effort will fail, but also that the ultimate results will be diametrically opposed to those originally sought. Sustainability of effort and resources can never be assumed, common language does not neces-

sarily signify common values, and ability to transmit technical knowledge does not equate with ability to instill values. Training can provide needed skills that serve both host country and American national interests. It can produce ties and relationships that may prove of future benefit. Moreover, it can create a core within the U.S. Armed Forces that

understands the military culture and problems of another society. But it cannot transform a society according to preconceived blueprints. Refusal to understand and accept the limits of influence only ensures that the final result of creating military and police institutions in another culture will deviate from the original goals envisioned for such forces. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a history of the Cuban military, see Rafael Fermoselle, *The Evolution of the Cuban Military, 1492–1986* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1987). For Panama, see Carlos Guevara Mann, *Panamanian Militarism: A Historical Interpretation* (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996). For Haiti, see Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971). For the Dominican Republic, see Bruce J. Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic During the U.S. Occupation of 1916–1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984). For Nicaragua, see Richard L. Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S. Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Millett and Marvin Soloman, “The Court Martial of Lieutenant Rafael L. Trujillo,” *Revista/Review Interamericana* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1972), 396–404.

<sup>3</sup> For a Marine officer’s appreciation of the situation, see H.C. Reisinger, “La Palabra del Gringo: Leadership in the Nicaraguan National Guard,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 61 (February 1935), 215–221.