

THE FIRST AMERICA VS “AMERICA FIRST”

THE LATIN ALTERNATIVE IN THE “NEW WORLD”

The Americas, long under the Iberic colonial spell, fell mostly under the sway of the Anglo-Saxons after the Spanish and Portuguese imperial territories achieved independence. A reversal of this process may have begun with the rise of the Latin—and native American—factor from Cape Horn to Canada. The vast natural resources, fast growing population and rich cultures of Latin America, increasingly interconnected with the peoples and civilisations of other continents across the Pacific and Atlantic, bear a promise of global influence for those nations in the years to come.

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To the Europeans of the Renaissance and Baroque age, the Americas had a Latin face. The fabulous Western Indies soon to be explored by the Conquistadors were divided up between Spain and Portugal by the Papacy according to the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1498, only six years after Columbus had claimed the uncharted lands for the crown of Castille.

According to that dispensation, based on the uncertain cosmography of the time, Lisbon could legally extend its sway over the East Indies, already reached by Vasco de Gama as well as over the easternmost parts of the new lands, soon to be known as Brazil, whose coastline turned out to mirror the African western shores already mapped and earmarked by Prince Henry the Navigator’s seamen. The rest of the continent, later named by a strange quirk of fate after the Florentine agent of the Medici family Amerigo Vespucci, was to fall into Madrid’s domain. A pair of Latin Roman Catholic powers thus enjoyed exclusive Church-sanctioned control over the immense expanses that had just been opened to colonisation.

Destiny was to make Latin America a larger-scale image of the Iberian peninsula, divided into two linguistic-political entities. Brazil, like Portugal, remained a centralised, homogeneous nation. Spanish America on the other hand consisted of a number of viceroyalties, just like its mother-country which was indeed a federation of kingdoms brought together under one crown. The names of those colonies mirrored the metropolitan toponyms. The land of the Mexicans was christened as New Spain while the future "Gran Colombia" (which included Venezuela) was "Nueva Granada" to the Castilians. The Southern plains of the continent where Argentina was to take shape owed their name of "La Plata" to the "silver river" which gave wide access to the Spanish galleons. Only Peru kept its native designation within the imperial nomenclature of the "Reinado de Indias".

There is nowadays little doubt that America, which seems to have been the "Ultima Thule" alluded to by Plutarch, was indeed "discovered" several times in Antiquity and the Middle Age. Evidence is building up behind the claims that the Phoenicians, the Greeks, possibly certain African seafarers and later

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the Celts crossed the Atlantic before the Vikings, who are now fully acknowledged as "Pre-Columbian" settlers on the Eastern seaboard. The Chinese and the Japanese, as well as certain Polynesian sailors very probably reached the West coast. The

New World was hence no more isolated than it was new. From the mid-twentieth century, the German diplomat-turned archaeologist von Wuthenau collected a number of records and iconographic artworks evincing that the supposedly indigenous population of the Americas included various immigrant strains probably originating in Africa and the Asian Far East. This possibility was evoked by various early chroniclers of the Spanish conquest only to be dismissed subsequently by "orthodox" scholars.

It was not long before other states of Western Europe objected in words and deeds to the high-handed decision of the Spanish-born Pontiff Alexander VI Borgia, taken with the financial support and complicity of the then-predominant Siennese and Florentine bankers. The rising powers of France and Britain, recently emerged from long and debilitating internecine conflicts, both staked competing claims to various areas of the new world but for more

than a century the Iberian “sister-states”, buttressed by the might and prestige of the German Holy Roman Empire were to have no effective rival while they consolidated their administrative and cultural hold over the Americas, from Alaska, reconnoitred by Valdez, to the strait that carries Magellan’s name in the far South.

Between 1580 and 1640, the crown of Portugal fell to the Spanish kings who thus controlled almost all the western hemisphere, in spite of the growing challenge posed by the Dutch, British and French warships and privateers. *Ipsa facto*, Latin America also remained under a single ruler until Lisbon recovered its independence.

The sway of the Iberian monarchies, enriched by the immense mineral deposits discovered in their overseas possessions, was truly global in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The vast amount of bullion mined in Mexico and Peru turned the Spanish silver Dollar (a name derived from the Saxon “Thaler” and later kept by the American Republic for its own monetary unit) into the world’s reserve currency, in use from China to Arabia and from South Africa to Britain. For the Castilian fleets, Mexico was a launching pad to cross the Pacific and reach the Philippines while the Portuguese, who had reached the China Sea from the other side through the Indian Ocean and the Malay archipelago, took positions in Southern China, Taiwan and Japan.

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THE ECLIPSE OF LATIN POWER

It was thus an astonishing reversal of fortune which, by 1763, made the United Kingdom the leading power in the Americas and saw the stars of the Catholic rulers in rapid decline. The French loss of Quebec and Louisiana—which comprised together two-thirds of northern America—and later the annexation of newly independent Mexico’s upper regions gave the English-speaking colonists control of the sprawling northern continent, with an overwhelming influence over Canada and Mexico. Washington’s strategic might

inexorably spread to the Caribbean and to South America, in the wake of the Monroe doctrine and in keeping with the creed of "manifest destiny", making the United States the sole claimant to the name of America to the detriment of the other, originally more prestigious American nation-states, some of which had inherited the legacy of the ancient Pre-Columbian empires.

Names tend to cast a spell on political and geographic realities. The US of America became the continental hegemon by the end of the civil war, and a global oceanic empire half a century later, reducing all other nations in the hemisphere to regional power status at best.

In that way as in some others, the Americas gave a mirror image of the evolution in Europe's history when the predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Germanic Protestant north became preponderant in succession to the Catholic, mainly Latin South.

Various attempts were made, during the nineteenth century, both by Europeans and Latin Americans to build a countervailing power on the continent. Bolivar strived unsuccessfully to preserve in a federal form the unity of Spanish America which Madrid had always been careful not to allow in administrative terms. Napoleon III's France and other Catholic nations attempted to establish a Habsburg-ruled empire in Mexico, capable of holding its own against the rising "Yankee" state, but that enterprise ended in tragedy. San Martin, another founding father of Latin American independence had likewise envisioned a Peruvian monarchy with a prince "imported" from Europe.

The failure of those designs left Brazil as the only other state of continental size which could politically and economically match the northern giant but the Braganza-ruled empire of Rio de Janeiro was, like its Spanish neighbours, still sparsely populated, barely explored and saddled with a cumbersome legacy of colonial bureaucracy and latifundist agriculture which was not conducive to the fulfilment of its budding ambitions. The military-controlled oligarchic Republic which succeeded the deposed emperor after the 1889 revolution was not able to get rid of that baggage, despite its zealous nationalism and its commitment to what was then ideological modernity.

After the First World War, in a context of European decline, the United States had every facility to flex its muscle, using the mechanisms repeatedly tested in Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America as also in the Philippines. President Theodore Roosevelt's military ventures set a pattern for Washington's interventions throughout its austral backyard.

The French philosopher of History, Amaury de Riencourt defined in his book *The Coming Caesars* (1950), a theory of cultural-civilisational cycles according to which the last one thousand years broadly reproduced the pattern of the last millennium of Antiquity, until the dawn of the Christian Era. To wit the early Middle Ages, from 1000 AD mirrored in many ways the heroic period of the Trojan war, whereas the early twentieth century witnessed the rise of a global (Anglo-American) imperial power, in the likeness of the spreading Roman Republican-Caesarian hegemony twenty centuries earlier. If we admit this seductive analogy, we find that the era of the Iberian conquests in the New World more or less corresponds, in the time mirror held up by Riencourt, to the age of Hellenic and Macedonian “discovery” and annexation of Asia and North Africa. In that chronological light, the universal emperor and king of Spain Charles V, plays a role akin to Alexander the Great’s, since both monarchs rule their “new” continents triggering a fusion between civilisations under the influence of their own, i.e. the Greek and the Hispanic-Germanic-Roman respectively.

Latin America hence became the seat of a hybrid civilisation in which colonial elements predominated but did not erase the native “Indian” features; similarly the Hellenistic Near and Middle East witnessed the rise of various mixed cultures combining the local Egyptian, Syrian, Persian and Indian components with those brought by the conquerors.

One should obviously not push the analogy too far and thus make it inaccurate but indeed both the Alexandrian empire and the Hispanic American realm broke up into various “Creole” states under the pressure of diverse national interests. Alexander’s generals divided the territories amongst themselves and the Spanish crown, as mentioned earlier, sliced its “Indian” possessions into four “viceroyalties” and a few “general lieutenancies” for administrative convenience and also in order to prevent the coalition of its overseas provinces against its rule. The liberators of Latin America, with the exception of the Mexicans who had a strong separate geo-historic sense of identity, wished to keep the newly independent lands united but the estrangement resulting from physical distance and the rivalries carefully nurtured by Spanish administration

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over three centuries did not allow the ideal of a continental confederacy to prevail, not even as Bolivar had hoped, as "a union of the hearts".

Bolivar's freedom struggle resulted in the breakup of the colonial Peru and Nueva Granada viceroyalties—most of which had been included within the Inca empire—into no less than six nation-states, while in the south, Uruguay and Paraguay remained separate from Argentina. Chile, isolated by its remoteness and its mountainous borders, acceded to independence on its own. In the Caribbean and the mid-American isthmus, the collapse of colonial rule brought about a multiplicity of small states, prone to engage in unending conflicts amongst themselves and proving to be easy preys for British and American naval expeditions. All in all, the seeds were planted at the outset of independence for enduring rivalries and protracted, often devastating warfare between the many offsprings of the Hispanic "Indies".

The situation turned out differently for the Portuguese empire which had the advantage of compactness and geographic continuity. Lisbon's rule imparted that huge area with relative cultural and political homogeneity, despite some

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Dutch and French inroads into the northern regions, as indicated by the fact that Brazil eventually gained its independence without losing its unity and with little effort under the leadership of its own monarch from the Portuguese royal line. At the end of the eighteenth century, Portuguese America was much larger in size than the nascent United

States and was blessed with seemingly inexhaustible natural resources. It was indeed a huge prize for any conqueror and it remains a historical miracle and probably a tribute to Braganza diplomacy, that a small and rather poor European state whose power dwindled continuously from 1580 onwards was able to hold on to it in the face of greedy, larger European rivals, until the early part of the nineteenth century, and preserves to this day a strong organic connection with the South American colossus.

The first and the second Brazilian emperors were influenced by liberal and secular convictions typical of the "enlightened" ideologies of the day which also marked many of the republican regimes of Hispanic America. Revolutionary

or at least reformist convictions though, inevitably clashed with surviving colonial realities, manifested by the predominant influence of the Church and the landed classes. By 1889 Brazil had become like almost its neighbours, a conservative republic with a penchant for dictatorial military rule.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Latin American regimes were variously inspired by the politico-social ideologies that Europe contemporaneously threw up with boundless generosity. Following the anti-clerical “enlightened despotism” of the eighteenth century came French Revolutionary Jacobinism and its unexpected offspring, Bonapartism, spawning the resilient mystique of army coups d’etat and the related reverence for messianic saviours in uniform. Later, under the powerful influence of Free Masonry, which challenged the monopoly of the Church, French Positivism became a guiding philosophy for the state in Mexico and Brazil particularly. However, these more or less indigenised foreign imports, of which the most recent example is probably Liberation Theology, were not readily adaptable to the essentially “baroque” character of Latin American polities which were heirs to the Catholic counter-reformation of Post-Renaissance Europe, and where strong conservative reactions could easily take hold. The appeal of Marxism among the masses triggered in reaction a fascination with para-military Fascism in the middle and upper classes and a recourse to Catholic authoritarian traditionalism as exemplified by Mexico’s Cristeros, Brazil’s TFP (Tradition, Family, Property) and the “Opus Dei”, so influential in Peru, Chile and Argentina among other states.

In that real clash of cultures, between an often violent Left and a reactionary, frequently “paranoid” Right, accentuated by the near-absence or fragility of a true middle class, one can discern a major factor for the explosive volatility of South American politics which only authoritarian governments seem able to control for limited periods. Another important conclusion that springs from the observation of the continent’s history is that the independent states built on the foundations of the Iberian empires by people at least partly descended from the Conquistadors have constantly borrowed their political, social and cultural institutions from Europe and North America. When they did not look East, towards their former colonial masters, they tended to gaze at the generally resented but increasingly powerful and prestigious United States.

The input of the native cultures in the constitutional, legal and political structure of those nations has remained negligible, however strong the “Indio”

ethno-cultural factor may have remained, especially in Mexico, Central America, Paraguay and the Andean states. In our age of rediscovery of tribal cultures, it is certainly time for Latin America to look back to its indigenous heritage and revive it with a view to resolving many of the problems caused by the colonial alienation common to most "Third World" countries.

IS THERE A REVIVAL?

Geographic, ethnic and perhaps also climatic factors help determine the extent to which Latin American states have sought to revert to their local roots and managed to form new composite identities strongly inspired by native precedents. Since Independence, Mexico has defined itself as a "mestizo" nation, often attempting to shun the Spanish colonial heritage, resented because of the destructive interventions of the conquerors against the Pre-Columbian civilisations. That half-hearted and unconvincing rejection of Hispanity, and of its essential ally Catholicism, has not been successful either with elites born and bred in a mostly European culture, or with the deeply religious masses, and Mexico could much less turn its back on its Spanish past than India was able or willing to renounce its British heritage.

The Mexican Catholic Church was in fact an early champion of national liberation, at least in its lower tier, and the "Grito de Dolores" was uttered by a priest. Thus, while many in the urban bourgeoisie found their moorings in Free Masonic Deism and later in Marxist atheism, the poor remained overwhelmingly Christian, drawing comfort from a faith which had adopted many of their native "pagan" rituals and customs and which drew its rank-and-file clerics from their midst. A comparable situation exists in the Meso-American mini-states and in the Andean nations, though the ruling classes there are more likely to be conservatively Catholic, as most of those societies did not go through the early experiments with radical social reform that have marked Mexican history since the 1867 civil war.

The self-image of Mexico, defined by its famous literary son Octavio Paz, as a country "with an Indian, non-European core" was consciously undermined in the eighties and nineties by successive Presidents who tried to reshape it as a North American state by "westernising" it on the model of the USA while bringing it into NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Zone, led and promoted from Washington DC). That attempt however seems to have met

with mixed success. In fact, the growing Middle American Hispanic (Chicano) population in the USA appears destined to reclaim the formerly Mexican lands annexed by the Union throughout the nineteenth century, thus avenging by demography the military and economic defeats suffered at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons. The west and south of the United States in particular are under an avalanche of Latin immigration compounded by the high birthrates observed among Hispanics. The Catholic, semi-feudal, family-centered mestizo Mexico is reasserting itself against the Yankee capitalist, individualistic, Protestant model hitherto enforced in North America and by 2050 Spanish-speaking “Indian” America, according to all projections, should again encompass much of the land between Florida in the south-east—the “New Cuba” which is increasingly an ethnic and economic appendix of the Latin continent—and Oregon to the north-west. That new reality may give new meaning to the legend of Montezuma’s revenge and it is at any rate, included in the strategic calculations of the Mexican Government which openly encourages its citizens to move north and settle in the larger, richer and less populated occidental United States.

Venezuela, like the three contiguous Guyanas, has a strongly defined “Caribbean” geographic and ethnic identity which accounts for its long-standing cultural and political propinquity with Cuba but its oil wealth puts the country in its own separate class.

In Brazil, the officer corps developed during the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries its own national security doctrine inspired by the German and Anglo-Saxon schools of geopolitics. In that perspective, Brazil, which has been called the “Iran of Latin America” by Huntington because of its linguistic and demographic distinctiveness and isolation, may also be compared with China from the point of view of size, geographic situation and hegemonic ambitions.

Invariably, like China, India, Iran and other giants, Brazil is regarded with suspicion by its neighbours and as a result, regional integration is often passively

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or actively resisted by them. Just like China has always wanted to hold sway over the Asian "roof of the world" in Tibet and eastern Turkestan and Mongolia, likewise the political-military ideology taught at the National Defence Academy of Brazil, enshrined as a core tenet the need to dominate and perhaps annex the Bolivian highlands (altiplanos) and other Andean plateaux which offer many physical and historical analogies with Tibet.

Naturally, those ambitions have fostered tenacious misgivings amongst Brazil's Hispanic neighbours and slowed down during several decades the development of a transportation infrastructure, due to apprehensions that good road and rail links would facilitate the demographic and economic expansion of the continent's colossus into the outlying regions. In fact a substantial settler emigration from Brazil has taken place for years into sparsely populated border areas of Bolivia and Peru, but in more recent years, the end of military rule in Brazil and the growth of economic bonds and pacts between the nations of the area have generally allayed those suspicions. However, instead of military conquest, economic colonisation is what the smaller Latin America countries may now fear. In that regard, it is enough to point out that the city and state of Sao Paulo have an economic GDP greater than that of entire Argentina, the second largest South American nation.

It is hence possible, that Brazil will become in coming decades the southern equivalent of what the USA is for North America, the indisputed superpower. Unsurprisingly the government in Brazil pursues with determination the formation of a regional economic community which it is bound to dominate, but gives only lukewarm support to Washington's project for an All American Free Trade zone (AFTA), within which it would play second (or third) fiddle to the USA and Canada. Marking its rise to the status of regional hegemon and global power, after emerging from many decades of isolationism, Brazil is a candidate to permanent membership of the UN Security Council and has, to that end, associated itself with four other strongly favoured candidates: Germany, India, Japan within the G-4 group while entering BRIC, another informal alliance of major nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China), aspiring to a prominent global role within a multipolar system that is expected to eventually bring to an end US predominance.

A sign in the country's new global outreach is the summit gathering twelve Latin American nations and twenty-two Arab states that was convened in Brasilia from May 10, 2005 to discuss economic and political relations. At a

time when the long-standing anti-US sentiments in these two regional groups are at an all-time high, such a concertation reflects a common desire for lasting emancipation while recalling another constant in Brazilian history, i.e. the tropism to and from Africa, reflective of the country's geographic and historic orientation and demographic make-up, just as Mexico, Peru and Chile are naturally turned to the Pacific and are hence inclined to develop economic and cultural links with Australia, Japan, China and South-east Asia. One of the results of the Conference, which also paved the way for closer collaboration in energy policies between the oil and gas producers and importers in both regions, was the opening of formal diplomatic relations between a number of Latin American governments and the Palestinian state, despite objections by both the USA and Israel which publicly expressed concern about this demonstration of increasing independence by the nations gathered at Brasilia.

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Indeed the Portuguese found the Brazilian coast almost by accident on their way around Africa towards India and they first valued it primarily as a stopover and a restocking base on the long journey to the orient. This ancient seafaring thread is being woven anew by the Brazil-South Africa-India agreement which set up an axis between the three countries known as IBSA. That pact is motivated by pragmatic economic and trading strategic interests, but is also inspired by their shared Lusitanian past which goes back five centuries.

Like all pacts, such new alliances sometimes experience difficulties. In early 2005 for example, IBSA ran into some trouble because of divergences between Brazil and South Africa on one side and India on the other, regarding negotiations for which they had so far taken a common stand. India broke ranks with its two allies and other members of the G-20 Coalition, over the issue of IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) in the context of talks within the WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organisation), showing that national interests, as understood by respective governments, are not always readily compatible even within a multinational framework but the larger imperative for regional and transcontinental economic cooperation remains undiminished.

Its Latin neighbours are not all reconciled with the prospect that Brazil will permanently represent their region within the UN Security Council, as

shown by Argentina's and Mexico's backing for the alternative UN reform proposal which would provide instead for rotating four-year memberships of that exclusive club to be shared within regional "blocks". But, no matter what proposal is adopted, it is no longer possible to challenge Brazil's position as the economic leader of the South American group of states.

Countries such as Argentina, Uruguay and Chile have comparatively insignificant "native" demographic components and hence have traditionally regarded themselves as overseas European societies. While the Hispanic and

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English Caribbean nations—including the "Haitian exception"—are of mixed European and African origins with no indigenous elements left, Colombia is a rather unusual case because it has an Indian and *mestizo* ethno-cultural majority, but remains largely faithful to the social model created by the Spanish colonisers. Its political system and its ruling elites, under the overwhelming influence of the United States, have scarcely adopted any autochthonous features and that

conservative character, surely accounts at least in part for the bitter and protracted civil war that pits since many decades the "white" ruling oligarchy against largely indigenous masses mobilised within various revolutionary movements.

As Samuel Huntington wrote in his famous book *The Clash of Civilisations* (p.156), "...The strength, resilience and viscosity of indigenous cultures and their ability to renew themselves and to resist, contain and absorb western imports" should not be underestimated and those who do so, like Mustafa Kemal in Turkey and more recently President Carlos Salinas in Mexico may be courting defeat in the long run, or as Bolivar expressively put it, "tilling the sea".

MULTILATERAL AGREEMENTS AND PACTS

The Monroe Doctrine was intended to keep European colonial powers out of the newly independent Latin American states, but the USA, quickly adopting the policy assiduously implemented hitherto by Imperial Spain, was interested in preventing the various sovereign countries of the continent from forming a union. The only kind of federation beneficial to Washington's interests was one which would keep both the Americas under its control. That coordination was sought to be achieved by the Organisation of American States (OAS), set up as a successor to the Pan-American Union inaugurated in 1826 in Panama, at a congress convened by Bolivar, through a "treaty of union, league and perpetual confederation" which remained largely inoperative.

The OAS was founded by a charter signed in Bogota, Colombia, in 1948 by twenty-one nations and was supplemented by the pact of mutual defence of Rio de Janeiro to which, however, not all OAS members subscribed. With its headquarters in the US federal capital, the organisation has often acted as a policeman for the region and tended, predictably to enforce the US writ over its weaker members, using the influence of the superpower's government and corporate sectors on many constituencies of those societies, such as the business elites and the armed forces. Behind the benign façade of promotion of political, economic and cultural freedom, democracy and liberalism, a formidable machinery for repression of communism and protection of the interests of US business has been operating, sponsoring military coups d'états and installing dictatorships when leftist revolutions were feared.

The OAS has however not remained immune to the winds of change and the election in May 2005 of the Socialist Home Minister of Chile as its new secretary general, in the face of US opposition, illustrated the shift in that body's orientation under the influence of the left-leaning governments which are a clear majority on the Southern continent.

Indeed, information is gradually emerging about the extent of involvement of the US Intelligence and Covert Operations Agencies, including the CIA and other lesser known branches of the Executive, in the setting up and running of the long-lasting military regimes in countries like Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Paraguay in the southern continent and in the Dominican republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in Central America.

The system of repression and "counter-terrorism" involving mass arrests, "disappearances" of suspects, assassinations of dissidents by anonymous paramilitary "death-squads"—such as the transnational "Operation Condor" in the seventies and early eighties—illegal detention, systematic torture and secret executions (also cryptically known as the "El Salvador Option"), then coordinated in that country and across the region by the US Ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, (currently President Bush's National Intelligence Chief), was perfected, under US mentorship and protection by agents trained by the CIA and "Special Forces". The only country in Europe to have experienced that mechanism of US-backed "counter-subversion" was Greece under the dictatorship of the Colonels (and Italy to some extent during the "leaden years" of the seventies). It may now be fruitful to investigate whether the large-scale operations undertaken by the Bush administration to repress Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, Central and East Asia before and after the "9/11 attacks" do not represent a pursuit of the same time-tested policies on new theatres.

The methods used in Latin America were often striking in their brutality. A good illustration was provided by the September 11, 1973 coup that overthrew and killed President Allende of Chile, after the country's air force bombed the Presidential Palace with the approval of US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. But a more recent one that comes to mind is the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to remove President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela in April 2002 which

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forced him and his staff to leave the seat of government under the putschists' threat of blowing up the building with all the people still inside. It is small wonder, therefore, that most people throughout the continent take a dismal view of the American occupation of Iraq, that systematically employs these techniques, and more generally, of

Washington's war on terrorism, both of which they see as the latest manifestations of a century-old policy of covert operations and brutal repression practiced in their own lands by the same familiar actors.

In reaction to that long-standing record of covert and overt interference President Chavez took the decision in April 2005 of expelling all American military personnel from the country and ending existing defence and security cooperation agreements. This step is to be placed in a context of fading relations between the armed forces of Latin American nations and their counterparts in the USA, with a few exceptions such as Colombia. Much of that decline is due to the adoption of ASPA (the American Servicemen's Protection Act) by the Senate in Washington DC, which prohibits any security assistance to, or cooperation with any country, that recognises the UN International Criminal Court, such as no less than eleven South American states do. Since ASPA was passed, the number of officers in training from major Latin nations in the US military schools has gone from seven hundred to none, according to a report by Pamela Hess, the UPI correspondent at the Pentagon. Significantly, General Bantz Craddock, the head of the US Southern Command noted, "The void left by the US after ASPA is increasingly being filled by China."

Several regional groupings were formed in previous decades by Latin Americans but until recent years these met with only limited success, partly because of their governments' excessive dependence upon the USA. The Association of Caribbean States (CARICOM) set up in 1994 was hampered by economic and linguistic disparities between its members. CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Association), launched in 1990, seems to be on firmer footing though many problems remain, including those caused by the fact that the United States is the founding father and is hence bound to retain complete domination over the tiny Central American republics. For a number of reasons, CAFTA still faces determined opposition in both the US and some of the smaller members.

MERCOSUR, born in 1991 as a common market between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay became a partial customs union in 1995 when Brazil replaced the USA as Argentina's largest trading partner, but nearly collapsed when Buenos Aires pegged its currency to the Dollar and attempted to anchor its economy to that of the USA under the ultra-liberal stewardship of Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo. The great Argentina crisis of 2001 has had the effect of reversing the fortunes of MERCOSUR as the two regional giants have been brought closer by necessity since then. Three equally diverse and politically divergent countries, Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela are

unlikely partners in the Tripartite Pact, which current tensions between Caracas and Bogota have done little to reinforce. In 1994 the Andean group of countries launched a customs union. Chile on the other hand under the influence of its distinctive political and social dynamics, has sought to achieve an advanced degree of economic integration with the USA through a free trade agreement, but nevertheless, Chile is now ruled by a social-democratic party with deep roots in the Left which views with suspicion and antipathy the neo-conservative policies of the Republican administration in Washington.

The latest transnational initiative in the region, which inevitably poses the greatest challenge to the US hegemony is Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution, seeking to build a new economic and political compact for social justice and reform. The principles of the programme are inspired by long-standing ideals of equity, state-insured welfare and educational upliftment of the masses. Such goals, which may evoke primarily Cuba's Castroist regime, are in fact in the tradition of Latin American corporatism and populism, upheld by leaders as diverse as Zapata and Cardenas in Mexico, Peron in Argentina, Allende in Chile and Goulart in Brazil, but remain quite unpalatable to the US Republican establishment. President Chavez is using Venezuela's considerable oil wealth (which makes the country the largest supplier of crude to the USA, on par with Saudi Arabia) to attract the support of his neighbours for his plans involving commodity barter between countries seeking an alternative to the dollar-based US-dominated global trade regime.

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Chavez's socio-economic initiative, given the catchy acronym of ALBA ("dawn" in Spanish) for "Alternative Bolivariana para las Americas" (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), championed by *Telesur* (a new international media network touted as the "Latin alternative to CNN") poses a direct threat to the US-sponsored AFTA which he bitterly opposes. In December 2004, the "Community of South American nations" saw the light of day, bringing together the MERCOSUR members, Chile and the Andean nations of Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia with Venezuela. Even if this coalition between politically strange bedfellows is still fragile, the Chavez regime enjoys at any rate the strong support of Brazil and Argentina whose current rulers share his

commitment to socialist redistributive policies and economic nationalism in societies which are among the most unequal in the world. As the former, pro-business President Fernando Cardoso of Brazil, once said, "Brazil is not a poor country, it is an unfair country", and the same applies to all states in the region, not excluding even prosperous Chile, the "good student" of liberal reform carried out under the stewardship of graduates of the Chicago School of Economics during the years of Pinochet's rule.

In its heady enthusiasm and its aspiration to social justice and economic upliftment of the poor, the Bolivarian movement strikes a familiar chord in the soul of the masses which have often embraced charismatic revolutionary ideologies with a messianic appeal, (at times inspired by indigenous prophecies derived from Inca and Mayan legends), such as those championed by Che Guevara or by the Tupamaros and Montaneros of Uruguay and Argentina, the Peruvian "Sendero Luminoso" and "Tupac Amaru", "Commandant Marcos" in Mexican Chiapas or the Colombian FARC. The fact that it is backed by a Government, and that it has least so far shunned violence and relied on democratic electoral methods, gives it so much more power and hope to succeed.

The conjunction of indigenous cultural revival and socio-economic "anti-globalisation" activism in Latin America, from Chiapas to Tierra de Fuego is a potent brew which may well derail Washington's plans for a US-controlled Common Market. Even in Mexico, the popular Mayor of the Federal Capital, Lopez Obrador who is seen as the next President, is campaigning on a platform of leftist social reform and openly criticises the Liberal NAFTA policies which have increased poverty and unemployment in the country to the benefit of a narrow privileged elite.

Lopez Obrador (whose massive shows of popular support in Mexico City, embarrassing for the Bush administration, have been almost ignored by the US Media) is, with Chavez and Lula de Silva one of the living symbols of what Danna Harman in the Christian Science Monitor called "People power in

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Latin America". Another American commentator Paul Woodward has this to say about this phenomenon: "People power is a fine thing for shaking up Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but as it spreads to the Americas, it could be coming uncomfortably close to home. What if people power caught on in the USA?... The 'bread and circus' approach to democracy has so far been an effective guarantor of political apathy across (the US of) America but what if Americans in large numbers were to one day wake up from their slumber...?" (quoted by Thomas Engelhardt in *Tom Dispatch*, May 3, 2005).

Rather than Latin America becoming more (North) American, even though that process is also taking place, especially in the cultural arena, it is the USA which is becoming more Latin in yet another historical reversal. The large-scale conversions to Protestantism, mostly as an effect of North American missionary efforts, in Brazil and adjacent countries (in early 1990, twenty per cent of Brazil's population was said to be Evangelical), seem to have done little to change the nation's civilisational character and policy orientations at home or abroad.

On the other end of the continent, Canada, after declaring itself a bilingual nation with a strong Gallic component in Quebec and other eastern provinces, is rapidly turning into the world's most poly-ethnic and culturally diverse country, incorporating growing contingents of immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia—predominantly China—and the rest of the Americas.

Huntington's recommendation to "encourage the westernisation of Latin America and, as far as possible, the close alignment of Latin American countries with the West" seems to be going against the flow because the multiplication of business relations between the European Union and Latin America is not drawing the latter towards the USA either, in view of the fact that Europeans are ideologically closer to the Leftist currents that prevail south of the Rio Grande than the generally unpopular "gringos". In fact Latin America is, as Huntington recognises "a separate civilisation closely affiliated with the West and divided as to whether it belongs to the West". Critically it lacks what has made the USA what it is, the so-called American creed which is inseparable from the nation's Protestant identity as "a child of the Reformation", and has turned it into what GK Chesterton aptly called "...a nation with the soul of a church".

The USA, founded on the premises of an openly anti-Catholic religious tradition, only grudgingly accepted the presence of the “Popish Church” after the latter considerably modified its outlook and teachings on American soil, in order to come closer to the prevailing socio-economic philosophy and to the majority Reformist denominations. Yet the formative “wasp” factor in the national “yankee” identity is steadily dwindling and does no longer seem to be able to dominate and absorb the potent Hispanic (and other) ingredients that are penetrating the body politic.

When Spain was under the conservative leadership of Prime Minister Jose-Maria Aznar, the Republicans in Washington used their influence on Madrid to promote a “pro-business” alliance between the two countries, and the economically liberal Latin American rulers, hoping that this would keep the latter countries in the US orbit with Spanish political and financial backing. But the defeat of Aznar’s party at the general elections of March 2004 at the hands of the Socialists put paid to that plan for the time being. Indeed, Zapatero’s Left Wing Government is, if anything, ideologically consonant with the “Pink-Red” wave sweeping over the southern continent and thus reinforces the atavistic bonds between the erstwhile imperial overlord and its old colonies. There are important differences between European and Latin American visions of socialism and social democracy, but on both continents the traditional role of the state as a corrector of economic inequities and a protector of the weakest sections of society is upheld, in contrast to the US priority on individualism and promotion of big business.

In a paper presented to the second “Latin American Congress for an Alternative Politics and Culture” held in Santiago, Chile, in September 1998 and entitled “About the ultimate predestination of Latin America”, the controversial but often prophetic French-Romanian philosopher and geopolitician Jean Parvulesco called for the continent to carry out its own national and social revolution, according to the terms of “Peron’s vision”, in

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order to become integrated and capable of decisively modifying to its advantage the balance of power with the United States, with the support of greater Europe.

The massive investments committed by China, especially in Brazil, Chile and Venezuela, together with the growing economic interaction with other Asian powers, such as Japan, South Korea and lately India and Iran (with which Venezuela has signed a number of cooperative agreements) are rapidly undermining the long-standing US policy of keeping Latin America as its protectorate. The Pacific and Atlantic Oceans no longer isolate the continent; they rather bind it to Europe, Africa and Asia, with the ties of history, common economic interests and shared colonial experience. Perhaps for the first time in five centuries, the people of the "Indies" claimed by Columbus and Cabral are finally emancipating themselves from a succession of conquerors to freely choose their destiny in keeping with their own mixed and peculiar identity.