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Debate

A Long Pattern of Not So Divine Intervention: A Commentary on Brian Loveman's *No Higher Law*

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Late in 2010, Brazil's outgoing president Luiz Inácio da Silva complained that sadly the United States had not changed its conduct toward Latin America during the tenure of President Barack Obama. "The Americans don't have an optimistic vision of Latin America," Lula asserted. "They have always related as an empire to poor countries. This vision needs to change."¹ Brian Loveman, professor emeritus of political science at San Diego State University, would readily agree. In Loveman's view, Obama has inherited "the legacy of two centuries of America's belief in its own exceptionalism and global mission." This "tether to the past," he argues in *No Higher Law. American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere*

¹ Robin Yapp, "U.S. Still Acts Like an 'Empire' with Latin America, Says President Lula," *The Telegraph*, 28 December 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk> (accessed 3 February 2011).

since 1776, condemns “the United States, Latin America, and the rest of the planet [to] further catastrophes resulting from an America that recognizes no higher law than its own definition of national security and its quest for global primacy.”²

Author and co-author of an extensive number of works on Latin America, Loveman has written a tract explicitly aimed at our time, a 500-plus-page historical *j'accuse* of United States foreign policy in Latin America and in the world at large.³ “Writing history,” he affirms in his opening sentence, “is almost always an effort to make the past speak to the present. I have written *No Higher Law* in that spirit. My research has been guided by concerns about the United States and the world in the first decades of the twenty-first century.” Disavowing connection to any established school of thought regarding United States foreign relations, Loveman contends that a long-term, multicausal view yields a picture of considerable continuity in U.S. actions abroad since the foundation of the republic. For him, the assertive, even reckless, policies that Washington has pursued since September, 2001 are less aberrations and more the logical, if lamentable, manifestations of well-established patterns of U.S. government conduct. Despite all the changes that have taken place since the late eighteenth century in the international system and in U.S. economic and military power, history reveals, Loveman argues, “a continuity in certain beliefs, institutions, policies, and practices in the American experience as part of the country’s evolving grand strategy.”⁴

² Brian Loveman, *No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere since 1776*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

³ Among his more well-known works are *Chile: The Legacy of Hispanic Capitalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and two co-authored volumes with Thomas M. Davies, Jr.: *The Politics of Antipolitics: The Military in Latin America*, 3rd rev. ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1997), and an edited edition of Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* entitled *Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare*, 3rd rev. ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1997). A full list of his publications is located at <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/polsciwb/brianl/cv.html> (accessed 4 February 2011).

⁴ Loveman defines grand strategy as “the effort to define a state’s strategic interests and to focus and coordinate diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military assets of its government and peoples to achieve its self-defined national objectives. Such objectives always include security (survival), but the definition of interests and other objectives may change over time, requiring reformulation of grand

Loveman's analysis focuses on five factors that have remained central in shaping United States conduct toward Latin America and the rest of the world. (1) Underlying U.S. policies is a widely-shared belief in American exceptionalism and an almost missionary faith in the United States as a beacon of liberty and democracy in the world. For Loveman, this self-perception lies at the core of U.S. identity and its expressions of nationalism amid the dynamics of domestic politics and the international system. (2) Since the days of George Washington's presidency, the country has known "no higher law" in its international affairs than its own decisions. Although the twentieth century brought American participation in alliance systems, the U.S. has always retained the capacity for unilateral action. By definition, Loveman argues, no great power exercises benevolence in its international affairs. While European nations operated through a system of balance of power, unilateralism has always been the preferred mode of action for the United States (3). Across the decades of U.S. history, certain practices have consistently characterized American foreign policy, in particular aggressive diplomacy, the use of military force, and a predilection for regime change. Far from originating with contemporary neoconservatives or even with the Cold War, Loveman sees U.S. promotion of regime change as first emerging in the early nineteenth century acquisition of Florida. Subsequently it became a feature of American conduct toward Central America, the Caribbean, and Hawaii (4). Almost from the start, Loveman argues, "Spanish America and Brazil were much more important in defining emergent American national identity and the American role in the international system than is commonly understood." While often manifesting disdain for Latin Americans, U.S. policy makers have consistently sought to keep the Western Hemisphere as a separate region of the world, one free from extra-continental influence and compliant with American wishes. The United States has determined it essential that Latin America serve as a secure "bastion" that would allow Washington freedom of action to pursue its interests in the rest of the world. (5) The U.S. has treated Latin America, Loveman contends, as a "laboratory for foreign policies that were later 'exported,' with some

strategy in relation to changing international, regional, and domestic contingencies" (406, note 8).

tailoring, to the rest of the world as the United States became a global power.”

Loveman’s arguments build upon the critical strands that have emerged in recent decades in the historical scholarship on U.S. foreign policy. In the midst of the Pan American solidarity of World War II, the predominant academic views on U.S. actions in Latin America varied considerably from those that have developed since. In 1943, Samuel Flagg Bemis could remark that the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century imperialism of the United States had been “comparatively mild” and had since been “fully liquidated.” Washington had engaged in “essentially a protective imperialism,” Bemis wrote, one that “was not really bad” and one that had been “never deep-rooted in the character of the people [of the United States].”⁵ Following the expanding U.S. global projection of the Cold War and the “unipolar moment” of the last twenty years, historical accounts of United States relations with Latin America no longer share the premises of Bemis’ ideas.⁶ Gone is the reflexive acceptance of the Western Hemisphere idea—“the proposition that the peoples of this Hemisphere stand in a special relationship to one another which sets them apart from the rest of the world.”⁷ The conduct of U.S.-Latin American relations has been “essentially derivative” of the global setting in the view of Peter Smith. Throughout history, he argues, the United States has crafted policies toward Latin America in accord with its perception of the region’s importance relative to U.S. worldwide interests, not in accord with any presumed common values within the Western Hemisphere.⁸

Gone as well is the assumption that U.S. officials and the broader American public are disposed to regard Latin Americans as equals. “A belief in Latin American inferiority is the essential core of United States policy toward Latin America,” writes Lars Schoultz. It acts as “a subtle but

⁵ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States. An Historical Interpretation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1943), 385.

⁶ The phrase “unipolar moment” is usually identified with Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70.1 (1990/1991): 23-33.

⁷ Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Western Hemisphere Idea. Its Rise and Decline* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), 1. See also Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

⁸ Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle. Latin America, the United States, and the World*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 400-405.

powerful mindset that has precluded a policy based on mutual respect.”⁹ Nor are historians of United States foreign relations so likely as they once were to suppose an inherent benevolence in U.S. international conduct, an assumption that once stood as a staple view of the standard English-language texts on inter-American relations. A generation ago Gordon Connell-Smith criticized U.S. historians of inter-American relations for their “marked disinclination” to “dissociate themselves from the United States self-image” of “unique benevolence” toward Latin America with the result that “they cling to a conviction that, in spite of many—even serious—mistakes, their country’s intentions have been good.” On the contrary, he argued, the United States has “adopted an attitude of superiority toward Latin America and Latin Americans.” Out to enhance its own interests by excluding non-continental influence from the Western Hemisphere, the United States has established its own regional hegemony. “Freedom for Latin America,” Connell-Smith asserted, “has always meant to the United States freedom from extra-continental domination, not from her own.”¹⁰

While Washington’s policies in the hemisphere still have their defenders, neither Latin Americans nor historians of United States foreign policy are in the main as disposed as they once were to accept U.S. official views at face value. In 1944, Walter Lippman could claim that the imbalance of power in the Western Hemisphere had “led to a radical innovation in human affairs, and to the only true substitute for empire, which we call the Good Neighbor Policy.”¹¹ After the experience of pervasive U.S. intervention in Latin America during the Cold War and the twenty-plus years of its aftermath, any such profession of common partnership is likely to meet widespread skepticism and even hostility. The current age of invasive and intimate U.S. involvement in the affairs of other societies around the world has induced prominent historians of foreign relations to adopt the term “empire” to characterize the full extensions of United States

⁹ Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States. A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), xv-xvi.

¹⁰ Gordon Connell-Smith, *The United States and Latin America. An Historical Analysis of Inter-American Relations* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), xiii, 3, 6, 281.

¹¹ Walter Lippman, *U.S. War Aims* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1944), 85.

influence, both past and present. “America is and always has been an empire,” remarks Richard Immerman, noting that Americans became squeamish about the term empire only as the United States became more explicitly imperialistic in the decades after the Civil War.¹²

Major sectors of the United States public still remain imbued with the notion of American benevolence and focused upon territorial colonialism as the sole definition of empire. Accordingly, they cannot imagine that an American empire exists. Nevertheless, historians have become increasingly conscious of the immensely varied modalities that empires can take, especially in the contemporary world. Charles Maier, for example, has described the broad economic influence of the United States in the generation after World War II as an “empire of production” that subsequently became an “empire of consumption” after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency system and the rise of Reaganomics.¹³ Fundamentally, the concept of empire is about the exercise of power over others, and it is the degree of power itself that matters more than the specific form it takes. Power can flow through both direct and indirect channels, and as well by means of formal or informal mechanisms, a point that is central to Loveman’s book and that has gained increasing salience in recent scholarship. Arguing the need to go beyond the conventional equation of U.S. intervention in Latin America with the use of armed force, Schoultz notes that “the United States has gradually developed a panoply of more subtle mechanisms to encourage Latin Americans to behave as Washington wishes.” Giving this perspective an even fuller expression, Greg Grandin has labeled Latin America the “empire’s workshop,” that is “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.”¹⁴

¹² Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty. A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4, 6, 10.

¹³ Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Lars Schoultz, “Evolving Concepts of Intervention: Promoting Democracy,” in *The Globalization of U.S.-Latin American Relations. Democracy, Intervention, and Human Rights*, ed. Virginia M. Bouvier (Westport and London: Praeger, 2002), 27; Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop. Latin America, the United*

Loveman locates the origin of the United States as an empire in the country's origins as an isolated republic, menaced by the influence of imperial monarchies over nearby territories, and anxious to expand both territorially and commercially. He argues convincingly against the myth that the early United States was isolationist, noting that U.S. unilateralism was certainly not isolationism. By the end of its first generation of existence, both in defense of its own security and in pursuit of its own ambitions, the United States had established "bedrock" foreign policy approaches such as the No Transfer Principle and James Monroe's opposition to any renewal of European colonialism in Latin America. In time these became "doctrines" facilitating both U.S. hegemony over Latin America and later a vast twentieth-century expansion of American global influence. Manifest Destiny overshadowed the 1840s-1850s as the war with Mexico converted the United States into a transcontinental power, the 1846 Bidlack-Mallarino and 1850 Clayton-Bulwer treaties shaped a U.S. protectorate over the Isthmus of Panama, filibustering expeditions operated in the Caribbean and Central America, and Washington demonstrated more than once its desire to acquire Cuba. Throughout Loveman identifies events and policies as harbingers of later developments: the Monroe Doctrine foreshadowed U.S. Cold War determination to exclude Communist influence in the Americas; the no transfer approach to Cuba embodied the unilateral exclusion of other powers and threatened regime change; the defense of American merchants around the world hinted at twentieth-century U.S. global reach; and the special funds that Congress allotted both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson presaged the role of foreign policy in the evolution of the imperial presidency.

As Loveman proceeds through his examination of the worldwide and Western Hemisphere activities of the United States, he devotes considerable explanation to the pressures of U.S. domestic politics upon foreign policy. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, these involve the interaction of the domestic and the international in matters such as tariff questions, slavery, sectionalism, transport subsidies, commercial interests, and the treatment of indigenous peoples. By the last

quarter of the century, rising commercial interests and advocates of big naval power progressively gained greater influence over foreign policy, giving birth to the first forms of Pan Americanism, Secretary of State Richard Olney's 1896 proclamation of virtual U.S. sovereignty over the Western Hemisphere, and the new imperialism. By the time of its entry into the First World War in 1917, the United States had won a war with Spain, acquired Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, taken Panama from Colombia, built an inter-oceanic canal, and implemented indirect rule by means of the Platt Amendment in Cuba and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean and Central America. At the same time, it had established the legal forms and institutions for American direct rule over Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and the Canal Zone. Only in Mexico had its use of armed force met outright failure in the occupation of Veracruz and the Punitive Expedition of General John J. Pershing.

With the turn of the twentieth century imperialism and the subsequent U.S. entry into World War I, the role of Latin America as a bastion for the United States in its worldwide policies becomes even more explicit in Loveman's account. The United States entered a phase of "protective imperialism" that included involvement in the internal affairs of Europe, the substitution of U.S. investors for European creditors in the Caribbean and Central America (Dollar Diplomacy), modernizing older instruments such as the Monroe Doctrine so that they enhanced claims to power (the Roosevelt Corollary), and envisioning a "benevolent" future growth of U.S. influence in Europe and Asia (Albert Bushnell Hart's 1916 book on the Monroe Doctrine).¹⁵ Loveman sees connections between retrograde social practices at home and this burst of imperial power abroad, between the claims of international benevolence and the reality of domestic repression. He notes how an institution of continental empire such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs became the model for an institution of extra-continental empire, the Bureau of Insular Affairs. "Taken together, Woodrow Wilson's policies seamlessly melded America's sense of global mission and democratic exceptionalism with interventionist policies abroad and repression of racial minorities and political dissents at home," he

¹⁵ Albert Bushnell Hart, *The Monroe Doctrine. An Interpretation* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1916).

writes. “That was *normalcy*, for America, even before it was taken on as a slogan by Wilson’s successor, Warren G. Harding.”

As *No Higher Law* continues through the decades of the twentieth century with an ever-thickening overlap of Latin American and global policies for the United States, Loveman’s coverage of American domestic matters shrinks in comparison to his earlier chapters on the nineteenth century. His treatment of the independent internationalism of the 1920s and 1930s notes the vastly increased international economic power of U.S. interests and the growth of Reciprocal Trade Agreements in the American Foreign Policy of the late 1930s. U.S. initiatives in the 1920s expanded American claims of self-defense, interpreting the Monroe Doctrine as giving the United States the right to unilateral action against any “encroachment” by a non-American power in the Western Hemisphere. While the Good Neighbor Policy of the New Deal formally accepted the equality of states, withdrew U.S. troops from the Caribbean and Central America, and pledged nonintervention in the affairs of Latin American nations, Loveman regards these measures as a change in tactics, but not in the grand strategy of U.S. preeminence in the hemisphere. The Roosevelt administration pursued American economic influence, engaged in political interference in Latin America, and in the Pan American conferences of 1936, 1938, and 1940 worked to gain inter-American legitimization of its claims to preemptive self-defense. By the terms of the 1940 Act of Havana, Loveman notes, any two states (i.e. the U.S. and one subordinate Latin American government) could act if there was “reason to believe that an act of aggression is being prepared.” Like the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty), the Act of Havana supplemented the Non Transfer Principle and the Monroe Doctrine as legitimizations for U.S. intervention in Latin America. By 1947, the concept of “self-defense” would encompass not only preemptive action against perceived external threats, but also measures to repress presumed internal Communist subversion.

As one would expect, when Loveman’s narrative reaches the Cold War the intensity of interaction between Latin American policy and global policy escalates considerably. “Consistent with the history of U.S. grand strategy,” he writes, “the Western Hemisphere formed the bastion from

which global policies emanated like the web of a spider.” The number of foreign policy “doctrines” echoing the No Transfer Principle and the Monroe Doctrine multiplied, one for each president from Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan and additional ones associated with their leading underlings. The historical traits of the Latin American policy of the United States became a treasure trove of measures that successive administrations administered around the world. The Truman Doctrine emerged as the global embodiment of the No Transfer Principle, the Monroe Doctrine, the Olney proclamation, and the Roosevelt Corollary all rolled into one. The Carter Doctrine appeared to be the No Transfer Principle applied to the Persian Gulf. The 1947 Rio Treaty and the 1948 Organization of American States influenced the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other regional organizations. All over the globe the Cold War national security state applied the military assistance pacts, police training regimes, intelligence networks, clandestine operations, and cultural programs that had first developed in the context of U.S.-Latin American relations. Military bases proliferated, regime change became a standard option in the foreign policy tool bag, and concepts of preemptive self-defense justified both overt and covert measures against subversion. The Reagan administration undertook a unilateral crusade of Wilsonian democracy promotion. Along the way the Cold War “deepened the gradual and cumulative erosion of constitutional government and corruption of republican institutions that had been under way since the failure of Reconstruction right after the Civil War.” As the Iran-Contra scandal made clear, the Cold War would erase the line between domestic and international as never before. “On the home front,” Loveman sees an influence of Latin American policy in “the interplay of domestic politics, including tariff and immigration policy, racial and labor conflicts, and internal security legislation.”

Nor would the pervasive presence of Latin American policy cease with the end of the Cold War. Economic integration, the continued embargo of Cuba, and the proliferation of schemes to protect the United States from terror, narcotics, and immigrants have been prominent items in the domestic and foreign policy agendas of each of the four U.S. presidents that have held office since the Cold War. After his long

indictment of U.S. policy for its continued preemption, unilateralism, and arrogance, Loveman wonders whether the United States can restrain its “enlarged sense of manifest destiny” in time to “salvage and repair its own republican institutions” before they fall victim to “imperial overreach.”

Naturally any historical account as ambitious and as single-minded as this one will display notable imperfections. Specialists in one era or another of United States history will likely quarrel with some of Loveman’s interpretations, particularly over the relationships he claims existed between domestic matters and foreign policy. Minor errors of fact, careless wording, and citations without page references occasionally mar the book. Readers may find the back and forth between domestic coverage and international affairs awkward at times, especially in the chapters on the nineteenth century. Its considerable length notwithstanding, *No Higher Law* may appear incomplete to some. After the depth of coverage given to earlier eras, the chapters on the last forty years seem somewhat rushed, particularly when it comes to economic matters such as globalization and the consequences of the Latin American debt crisis. Although Loveman admits that the history of opposition movements “forms an essential part of the long view of the American mission and U.S. relations with its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere,” these movements earn little room in his narrative. Nor do the policies of Latin American nations receive much attention. *No Higher Law* remains a tale of U.S. decision makers.

Given Loveman’s determination to make the past speak so unequivocally to the present, *No Higher Law* exhibits three underlying—perhaps inevitable—flaws: over-presentism, over-continuity, and overstatement. The lines between the present and the past are rigidly straight, homogenizing the narrative, and removing the possibilities of nuance and contingency that are always part of historical experience. While Loveman admits at times that significant discrepancies of opinion and motivations existed among decision makers, in the end these amount to little in the face of the march of the narrative of grand strategy. At times Loveman’s importation of the present into the past leads him into dangerously anti-historical wording as when he employs the term “military-industrial complex” to the years of Grover Cleveland. By stressing

continuity of experience so heavily, Loveman underestimates moments of transformative power, particularly the advent of the Cold War, which brought a radically changed and totalizing new context to world affairs. *No Higher Law* integrates Latin America into the world as a whole, wisely taking it away from Western Hemisphere separatism, but by the time of the Cold War it overstates Latin America's role as an originator of U.S. global policies. Latin America would continue as a bastion meant to serve U.S. worldwide policies as George Kennan's 1950 report made clear, but the initial frontlines of the Cold War were Europe and East Asia.¹⁶ The causality of the Non Transfer Principle or the Monroe Doctrine remains muddled in Loveman's text as notions of origin, analogy, similarity, and equivalency all seem to be involved but are not made precise. The Latin American experience of the United States was not the sole determinant of policy. For example, the Rio Treaty influenced the NATO pact, but it did so only in conjunction with the Treaty of Brussels.¹⁷ Central new policies emerged in the early stages of the Cold War for which Latin America was not the origin, such as the Marshall Plan, the European Payments Union, or the "reverse course" in Japan. Historical treatments of U.S. foreign relations that integrate Latin America into a world context must consider the region as an importer of U.S. foreign policy measures implemented elsewhere, not just as an exporter—thus the selling of the Alliance for Progress as a "Marshall Plan for Latin America" despite the fundamental distortions of the labeling.

These deficiencies notwithstanding, *No Higher Law's* central contention remains valid—the exalted self-image and unilateral style of U.S. Latin American policy since the late eighteenth century have carried over into America's relationship to the rest of the world. Now in the early twenty-first century, as Loveman recognizes, Latin America may be slipping away from its role as guaranteed bastion the United States. Political change, economic globalization, nationalism, and a renewed sense

¹⁶ United States Department of States, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950. The United Nations; the Western Hemisphere*, vol. 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 598-624, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1950v02> (accessed 4 February 2010).

¹⁷ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The United States and NATO. The Formative Years* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), 84-85.

of regional solidarity have opened new opportunities for more autonomous Latin American connections to the world not subject to the veto of the United States. The reconfiguration of global power structures—in particular the emergence of Brazil, Russia, India, and China—will continue to make the Western Hemisphere less and less of a “separate sphere.” Latin America and the world may not be looking to the United States “not just to engage, but to lead” as much as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton thinks.¹⁸ Instead, as the future unfolds, Latin America’s experience with the United States may come to underscore the pattern of other empires in world history: “As long as diversity and political ambition exist, empire-building is always a temptation, and because empires perpetuate difference along with incorporation there is always the possibility of their coming apart.”¹⁹ Rather than persist with what Andrew Bacevich has called the “sacred trinity” of global military presence, global power projection, and global interventionism, the United States might want in the second decade of the twenty-first century to consider Hans Morgenthau’s classic warning about militarism’s erroneous “equation of national power with material force” and its inability “to understand the paradox that a maximum of material power does not necessarily mean a maximum of over-all national power.”²⁰

¹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, “A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton,” 8 September 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/diplomacy/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton/p22896> (4 February 2011).

¹⁹ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 9.

²⁰ Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules. America’s Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 14; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 162.