

Soldiering the Empire

by Lesley Gill

WHEN THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS (SOA) closed in January 2001 and the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) opened in the same building, very little actually changed. The shift represented only a partial victory for SOA Watch, the social movement seeking to close the institution. The military made only cosmetic changes to this training facility—implicated in some of the worst human rights violations in Latin America—as it tried to give the impression of a fresh beginning. No one was held accountable for the methods taught there or the actions of its graduates, and the School continued to train officers to defend the ramparts of the U.S. Empire. The imperial logic that dictates the need for such institutions remained intact—if not reinvigorated.

The United States uses its power to penetrate and transform other states for its own purposes, a defining feature of imperialism. In the Americas, U.S. hegemony has always depended on soldiers to uphold a particular kind of capitalist order, and regional military forces have long served as basic tools of this U.S. imperial project. The SOA has played a vital role in this undertaking, having trained over 60,000 troops from its post-WWII founding to its 2001 reincarnation as the WHINSEC. It forms part of a hydra-headed repressive apparatus—encompassing armies, police forces, paramilitaries, arms manufacturers and think tanks—that consumes ever-more public resources as cold war pretexts give way to neoliberal policies generating widespread discontent. This apparatus, and the School's role within it, remains important as regional governments rely on the armed forces to control the social and economic disorder that, to a considerable degree, results from their own policies.

More than just military instruction, the School imparts a particular political orientation and acculturates trainees into a specific world

of values that it defines as “American.” Associated privileges ensure a steady stream of recruits seeking social mobility and political power, while the U.S. emphasis on regional militarization guarantees constant demand. These privileges largely secure the collusion of officers with the U.S. imperial project. The SOA also instills loyalty by flaunting the technological sophistication and expertise of the U.S. military as evidence of innate U.S. superiority. Many trainees fortify their positions vis-à-vis local competitors for power through access to this technology and esoteric information, even though this makes them more dependent upon the United States.

The School further tantalizes students with the “American way of life”—the commodity-filled, suburban lifestyle of the white middle class. Officers in the SOA's flagship Command and General Staff Officers Course enjoy a comfortable, consumer-oriented existence. They also learn English, educate their children in U.S. schools, earn part of their salaries in crisis-proof U.S. dollars and acquire commodities for personal consumption or sale as contraband. Little wonder many graduates end up viewing themselves as separate from, and superior to, civilians. In some countries, separate neighborhoods and social clubs for officers and their families reinforce this detachment.

The growth of this hemispheric apparatus rests on the asymmetrical relationships established among U.S. and Latin American officers at facilities like the SOA, something encouraged by U.S. instructors. Upwardly mobile officers spend up to a year training and socializing with U.S. colleagues and the future heads of other Latin American militaries. Although race, national identity and rank infuse the emergent relationships with tension, a sense of common purpose against variously-labeled “internal enemies” unites graduates. This facilitates the entrance of U.S. personnel into local armed forces, enabling greater influence and

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the gradual transformation of Latin American militaries into accessories of U.S. power.

The expansion of state violence in the Americas depends on impunity for Latin American security forces and their U.S. brethren. Shielded from accountability, they have gotten away with murder, torture and the disappearance of thousands during the dirty wars and harsh regimes of the late 20th century. After the return of civilian rule, repressive entities have often remained intact and survivors continue to live in fear; to speak out against crimes—past and present—is still difficult. Moreover, the prior violent demolition of grassroots organizations and local-level social relationships has deprived ordinary people of collective agency by which to press their demands. Unpunished state terror has thus set the stage for the consolidation of neoliberalism under civilian governments, which enact destructive

social and economic policies with similar impunity.

The SOA is a central tool in the construction of U.S. hemispheric dominance. It has helped to create an elite transnational military culture that shares a sense of investment in U.S. hegemony, enmity toward popular forces and unscrupulousness in the use of violence to maintain the status quo. Yet the status quo is extremely unstable and requires constant vigilance and intervention to maintain. This is especially true since September 11, as U.S. elites pursue a more overtly imperial agenda that provokes unpredictable responses. It is therefore likely that the School—or surrogate institutions—will remain a vital instrument of U.S. policy.

Developments since September 11 have upset the decorum that stifled the utterance of “empire” by mainstream pundits. Discussing “empire” and “imperialism” is now respectable. In *Harvard Magazine* Stephen Peter Rosen opined, “The U.S. has no rival. ... A political unit that has overwhelming superiority of military power, and uses that power to influence the behavior of other states is called an empire.” He adds, “Our goal is not combating a rival but maintaining our imperial position, and maintaining imperial order.” Similarly, Michael Ignatieff in the *New York Times Magazine* asserted, “There are many people who owe their freedom to the exercise of American military power.” Contemporary advocates of empire view the aggressive enforcement of a global order by and for the United States as a positive virtue. For economic historian Niall Ferguson, the issue is “whether or not America has the one crucial character trait without which the whole imperial project is doomed: stamina.”

The assaults of September 11 unleashed the self-righteous fury of the United States and bolstered its institutions for teaching, controlling and dispensing violence. The “war on terror” has no foreseeable end and provides new justification for remapping the globe in accordance with U.S. interests, whatever the costs, as we are seeing in the Middle East. The attack on Afghanistan dispersed—and surely expanded—the Al Qaeda network, while the Bush administration manipulated facts and fears to attack the oil-prize that is Iraq. The politics of oil and terror also shape U.S. involvement in Colombia, where “terrorism” now pervades government parlance. In early 2003, U.S. Special Forces arrived to provide counterinsurgency instruction to local troops as part of a \$104 million “counterterrorism” package designed to protect an oil pipeline used by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum. The U.S. Congress is now considering whether to raise the number of U.S. soldiers in Colombia.

Closer to home, the U.S. Army has used the tragedy of September 11 to reaffirm the mandate of the SOA-WHINSEC. According to the Army, it is more important than ever to “engage” with Latin American militaries, as terrorist threats increase. Additional monies now fund higher attendance, and officials expect annual enrollment to increase.

September 11 altered the moral bearings of much of the U.S. public. The legitimacy of torture is now debated openly, and its definition is being rendered more elastic. Torture brutalizes human beings and degrades the societies that approve of it. Yet Army interrogators now publicly acknowledge using it on suspected terrorists. One official told

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Washington Post reporters, “If you don’t violate someone’s human rights some of the time, you probably aren’t doing your job. I don’t think that [U.S. military officials] want to be promoting a view of zero tolerance on [the question of torture].” In March 2003, U.S. military officials also admitted that two prisoners in Afghanistan died from “blunt force” injuries while under interrogation. In this context, the “revelations” of Abu Ghraib were hardly surprising.

To what extent would a course on counterterrorism at the SOA-WHINSEC, especially in this more permissive era, simply update the brutal methods previously used? What would prevent alumni from using their training against the same kinds of people who were victims of last century’s repression?

U.S. Army officials will not entertain the notion of such continuity. The pretense is that the SOA is long-forgotten, its replacement completely untainted by the infamy of its predecessor. Disappearing history is a familiar and convenient ruse regularly applied to U.S. foreign policy. For besieged officials at Fort Benning, home to the SOA-WHINSEC, it is part of an ongoing effort to diffuse the social movement demanding an end to U.S.-sponsored state terrorism.

The September 11 attacks provided the Army new ammunition to fight SOA Watch, whose supporters annually converge by the thousands on Fort Benning to commemorate the victims of SOA graduates and call for the School’s closure. The military has long sought to portray these nonviolent protesters as a threat to public safety. In 2000, the Army circulated rumors about “anarchists from Seattle” coming to wreak havoc during the protest vigil.

Two months after September 11, it had the city government file an injunction against protest organizers, threatening imprisonment. Although a court order overturned the injunction, the fear-mongering continued the next year. It remains to be seen what tactics local officials will use against peaceful demonstrators in 2004.

Such efforts reveal that the U.S. military no longer underestimates the anti-SOA movement. Although the military divided congressional opposition by changing the institution’s name, the movement’s rank-and-file have not been fooled and continue demanding the closure of what they call the “School of Assassins.” Although the SOA-WHINSEC continues to operate, and the U.S. Army is unrepentant about tutoring militaries responsible for massive human rights violations, the movement has forced the School to reform. Manuals are now sanitized, and course offerings—including a token course on human rights—have been restructured to portray the SOA-WHINSEC as more civilian-friendly. Anti-SOA activists have also undermined military efforts to rewrite hemispheric history. Their yearly vigil keeps alive the memory of the dead and disappeared, chipping away at the edifice of impunity. And as nationalist fervor fuels the “war on terror,” the movement provides a broader perspective on the causes and agents of global terror, encouraging people to imagine a non-violent world with universal justice.

Yet the movement is at a crossroads, threatened by its own success. Although the SOA-WHINSEC is an important symbol, it is not the only or the most important institution of its kind. Because of the public scrutiny the movement has

brought upon the School, the SOA’s most sinister training practices have been relocated elsewhere. Even if the movement finally closes the SOA-WHINSEC, the imperial policies that spawned the School—as well as the invasions, proxy wars, death squads and rightwing dictatorships that have brutalized the region—will persist. Without ending U.S. imperial policy and dismantling its full infrastructure, the rights of Latin Americans will continue to be flouted.

Anti-imperialist arguments, however, are only made by some in the movement. Others object solely to “aberrant behavior,” such as the murder of priests and nuns by SOA graduates. As one activist told me, “I just can’t take the assassination training.”

Anti-SOA activists of various persuasions will debate strategy, as they have before. This is the substance of grassroots political activism. In their strategizing, they must take into account public sentiment, as U.S. belligerence gains support from many whose nationalistic and xenophobic sensibilities have been aggravated by fear of terrorism. All will not be decided in the United States, however.

The fate of the SOA—and the broader imperial adventure of which it is part—will also be determined in Latin America, where the chains of empire weigh heavily. Amazingly, people there always find ways to resist, undermining the order U.S.-trained militaries diligently seek to preserve. As U.S. military reach expands, solidarity within and among the social movements of the Americas becomes increasingly necessary for recalling memories of past atrocities, securing justice and accountability in the present, and building a more peaceful future. ■