

Atlanta Journal and Constitution  
January 10, 2001

## **Latin American Military Training**

### ***Institute differs greatly from School of Americas***

By Louis Caldera, Special

On Jan. 17, a new Department of Defense school, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, will open at Fort Benning near Columbus.

The institute will train and educate soldiers from Latin America, alongside U.S. Army soldiers, so that our militaries can more effectively pursue our mutual interests of peace, security, and stronger democracies in the Western Hemisphere.

Predictably, critics of U.S. military engagement in Latin America and throughout the world plan to denounce the opening of this new Department of Defense Institute, which follows last month's closing of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas. Even though the two institutions are different in nature and outlook, critics are already trying to impugn the integrity of the institute with the misleading, mindless slogan, "New name, same shame."

Some in the media, unfortunately, have played into this argument as well by describing the opening of the institute as the re-opening of the School of the Americas. It is not.

#### **New focus for training**

The Army's decision to close the School of the Americas was difficult but necessary after years of acrimonious debate animated by unfounded accusations that the school taught Latin American soldiers to repress human rights. This debate led the House of Representatives in 1999 to narrowly vote to cut off funding for the school.

While Congress overturned this vote in a Conference Committee, the initial House floor debate to cut off funding was illuminating. Opponents of the School denounced U.S. involvement in training Latin American soldiers, particularly during the brutal civil wars of the 1980s. They argued for closing the school on the basis that what was needed was an institution that would help strengthen democracy and respect for human rights in Latin America.

Thus, for two years I worked with opponents and supporters of the School of the Americas to create an institution that both could support, recognizing that the threats to security and democracy in Latin America in this century are different than they were in the last.

As a result, this past fall, Congress voted for legislation sponsored by the Clinton Administration not only to close the School of the Americas, but also to open a new Department of Defense institute. The new institute is forward looking; its goals explicitly include strengthening democracy, deepening the rule of law and honoring human rights. It will teach an array of military and civilian students to solve regional problems, including resolving border conflicts peacefully, fighting drugs and organized crime, responding to natural disasters, and supporting peacekeeping efforts.

#### **The critics' perspective**

Opponents of the now closed School of the Americas, however, are not even willing to give the institute a chance. They do not recognize the change that has occurred in Latin America over the past two decades and do not believe the U.S. military has anything constructive to offer to the people of the region. Persistent critics of the School of the Americas consistently use harsh anti-military rhetoric that does a disservice to our men and women in uniform. In truth, members of the U.S. Armed Forces work hard every day to maintain peace and security, and to spread the blessings of liberty and prosperity throughout the world. The U.S. military trains and works with our friends and allies across the globe and here in the Americas to achieve these noble goals in a manner that is fully consistent with our nation's most cherished principles and ideals, including respect for human rights.

Sadly, many fail to understand that securing peace by working with the militaries of other nations to alleviate fear, suffering and oppression is in our national interest. Some critics of U.S. foreign policy see all military organizations and actions as illegitimate. Their view that without militaries, there would be no human rights violations, is foolishly naive. As Thomas Hobbes wrote long ago, without order, life would be "nasty, brutish and short" and society would be engaged in a "war of all against all." One need only look to Sierra Leone, the Sudan and many other places throughout the world where governments are weak and warlords rule to recognize the importance of professional military forces to security, stability and the preciousness of human life.

### **Protests led to changes**

Sovereign nations have the right, and even the duty, to keep military forces to protect their people and territories from all manner of scoundrels who are kept in check only by the threat of response. The United States has an interest in ensuring these militaries are capable and professional, that we communicate well with each other, and that we work together to meet common challenges. The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, like Department of Defense sponsored institutes in Europe, Asia and Africa, will help us achieve these goals here in our own hemisphere.

Those who have supported efforts to close the School of the Americas should examine for themselves the nature and purpose of the institute, or they will miss seeing the very change they worked to create. They should not let themselves be used by those who believe that the U.S. military has nothing good to offer the rest of the world and who oppose all efforts to work with our neighbors to meet common security challenges.

Past critics of the School of the Americas should rejoice in what they have achieved. Now, they should give the institute a chance to contribute to making the Western Hemisphere an example to the world of a peaceful region dedicated to honoring the rule of law and respect for human rights.

*Louis Caldera is Secretary of the Army.*