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# The Democratic Sustainment Course at the U.S. Army School of the Americas

By

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Most U.S. citizens know that their armed forces are governed by elected civilians whose overall policies are accepted and carried out loyally by the senior military hierarchy. Intuitively, if not cognitively, most citizens know that the armed forces defend the nation against its foreign enemies, while the police protect the domestic population against crime, a concept in civil-military relations known historically as *posse comitatus* (Weighley, 40-42). Latin America, colonized by Spain and Portugal over a century before the British colonized North America, inherited a medieval concept of civil-military relations known as corporatism. It featured the armed forces and police as independent, deliberative bodies. The legal structure behind this arrangement came to be called the *fuero militar*, which translates loosely as “the military institution making its own laws and governing itself from within.” This system was structurally the same as the artisans’ guilds in Europe but politically more sensitive because the legitimate means of violence were lodged monopolistically within one corporate institution (McAlister, 25-28).

A few Latin American countries adopted the North American civil-military relations structure early in their national existence; Colombia, Uruguay, and Costa Rica are three. But the majority of Latin American countries abandoned the corporatist model of civil-military relations in favor of the North American civil-military relations model during the 1970s and 1980s, at the very time when several Latin American countries engaged their small armed forces against leftist insurgents who were armed, supplied and trained by Cuban guerrilla cadres, who were in turn supported by the Soviet Union (Wickham-Crowley, 5-8).

Modest but continuous quantities of U.S. security assistance program money were allocated to the professional development of these same armed forces engaged in combating armed domestic subversion. U.S. policy was often criticized for its tendency to foster the continuation of the outmoded corporatist military structure, since fighting a communist sponsored insurgency and simultaneously shifting to civilian control of the military became conflicting goals at times (Schultz, 324-330).

In early 1961, President John F. Kennedy feared that Cuba’s Premier Fidel Castro would sponsor a series of guerrilla wars in Latin America, putting at risk his imaginative “Alliance for Progress” framework of U.S. assistance for democratization and economic development. To this end, he dispatched then Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to the U.S. Army Caribbean (USARCARIB) School, in the Panama Canal Zone, where standard U.S. military doctrine courses had been offered in Spanish for Latin American military and police personnel since 1946. The USARCARIB School then added the Counter Guerrilla Operations Course, which was developed at the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, to its course offerings. This placed the U.S. security assistance program in support of armies and para-military forces engaged in domestic combat operations against revolutionary sectors of their own populations who enjoyed Cuban subversive support (Ramsey, 12-13).

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As the pilot project officer for this counter-insurgency endeavor, I saw quickly that some, not all, of the Latin American military officers could not effectively apply the U.S. Army doctrines. They were answering to a civil-military command relationship that made the armed forces politically deliberative in several sectors, sometimes connected directly to an authoritarian chief of state who depended upon their loyalty in order to govern. As part of the overall course development process, I prepared a memorandum recommending that the Latin American officers be offered a structural and functional course in civil-military relations, showing them the difference in national command authority. The U.S. Department of State, however, took on the purely political aspect of this issue within the Alliance for Progress reforms. In that era, several Latin American constitutional regimes were only partial democracies and were at the same time fighting for their very existence against insurgents, both domestic and foreign. So the USARCARIB School taught the Law of Land Warfare, a mandatory curriculum block that was presented to both U.S. and foreign military students throughout the system in those days and was commonly called “Geneva Convention” classes. In addition, the USARCARIB School sponsored extensive social programs for its Latin American students, activities designed to expose them to the U.S. democratic way of life (U.S. Army Caribbean School).

In 1963, the USARCARIB School at Panama was renamed the U.S. Army School of the Americas, and in 1984 it was moved to Ft. Benning, Georgia in partial compliance with the 1979 Carter-Torrijos Treaties with Panama. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 was accompanied by leaps forward into full political democracy in several Latin American countries, and the early 1990s saw the peace accord process succeed in war-torn Central America. A frustrated group of leftwing activists selected the U.S. Army School of the Americas, by now totally engaged in the professional underwriting of democratization and privatization throughout the hemisphere, as the target of opportunity by falsely accusing the School of the Americas of being the cradle for human rights abuses during the civil strife recently ended (Fishel and Fishel).

In 1992 I returned to the School of the Americas in its new home at Ft. Benning as Professor of Latin American Defense Studies. I was tasked to develop new professional courses that would support, within the military and police sectors, the modernizing trends that were well under way in the political and economic sectors. In the fall of 1994, I proposed a curriculum of civil-military structural and functional studies, to be taught at the postgraduate level via the seminar and case study mode. Since there is no single U.S. Army course on this topic, the Western Hemisphere Affairs Bureau, U.S. Department of State, agreed to act as mentor and approving authority for the course. First offered in 1996, the course has now completed four annual iterations with an average attendance of twenty-two students representing an average of nine different countries per iteration. Thirteen countries, in total, have been sent students.

The Democratic Sustainment Course is conducted during a six-week time block, in six phases that partially overlap. Students are a mix of military officers and civilian officials representing the executive and legislative branches of their governments. I teach about one week of civil-military relations through the historical case study seminar method: ancient Rome, medieval Spain, colonial New Granada, Spanish Civil War, modern Colombia, and the Philippines. Dr. Harvey Kline, Chairman of Political Science and Director of Latin American studies at the University of Alabama, teaches a week of seminars on current ideologies and governmental structures within the Latin American region. The U.S. Army School of the Americas Staff Judge Advocate, a postgraduate educated military lawyer, teaches a week of seminars on the juridical underpinnings of civilian control of the military, and the human rights issues which emerge from that structure. The U.S. Army School of the Americas chaplain, also holding postgraduate credentials beyond

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seminary training, teaches a week of seminars on the moral functions of civil-military relations and human rights.

The final week of the course is dedicated to playing the “Patria (Fatherland) Game”, an exercise in which the students play the role of leaders of five small countries in different stages of political and economic development. A series of events challenges their civil-military structure, and umpire decisions reward those choices which favor civilian control of the military and punish decisions which advocate more militaristically determinative solutions. Concurrent with these five phases, each student researches and writes an analytical paper on some aspect of emerging civil-military relations. Some prepare fascinating reports on structural changes within their own countries; others write about a different country or a topical theme of a specific country. At every possible step throughout the course, the seminar process and classroom discussions in small groups are employed in place of the large group lecture format.

Guest speakers for this course have included some of the most distinguished academic and governmental figures in the Western Hemisphere. Dr. Dan Papp, an international relations professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, lectures on the strategic flash points that occur during the democratization and privatization process. Dr. Carlos Murillo, Dean of the Costa Rican EARTH University, a distinguished agri-business institution, has lectured on educational foundations for democratic citizenship. Dr. Francisco Alves, a history professor at the Londrino University in Brazil, has lectured on civil-military relations in that South American giant. Diplomats representing the United Nations and the Organization of American States have discussed nations building exercises in the Western Hemisphere undertaken by their respective bodies.

Latin American priests with field experience in the region have discussed such sensitive themes as liberation theology and the movement in evangelical Protestantism. Care is taken to insure that students hear the case for the spiritual version of liberation theology, advocated by the Bishop Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru, as well as the political version of this concept which was condemned by Pope John Paul II in 1991 and again in 1993. U.S. Department of State speakers with high profile hemispheric positions have discussed U.S. relations with the region. Professor William Banks, distinguished professor of international human rights at Syracuse University, has lectured on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its implications for civil-military relations.

Who are the students? The eighty-seven students who attended the first four course iterations between 1996 and 1999 include military and police officers in the middle and upper management sectors, plus civilians from the defense ministries and associated agencies. A sampling by position title includes the Argentine advisor on civil-military structure to the Minister of Defense, the Uruguayan Director of Agricultural Assistance, the Chilean Advisor to the Minister of Defense on Juridical Affairs, the Colombian Army’s Chief Instructor on Human Rights, the Costa Rican Director of Curriculum at the Civil Guard Cadet Academy, and the Human Rights Violations Monitor for the Archbishop of Guatemala.

A sample of the course research paper titles produced to date is instructive, especially since several have been published or are under translation prior to publication. A Colombian officer wrote on the structural impact of the drug war and its corrupting influences on the civil-military relations structure. A Peruvian officer wrote on the Army’s human rights training program and its implications for civil-military relations. An Argentine officer wrote on the 1988 reform laws

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which create the current civil-military context there. Several Costa Rican Civil Guard officers and civilians have written on the elimination of the Army in favor of one centralized national security force and the ensuing civil-Civil Guard relations.

What ultimate national U.S. objective does this course serve? It provides a small pool of highly educated persons in critical military and civilian defense positions who can speak across the previous yawning chasm to legislators, church officials, leaders of the private economic sector, and diplomats. There probably is little measurable, short-term payoff from the course. But on a long range basis, these personnel are planting the seeds of modern civil-military relations that were long ago nourished within the United States by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Joel R. Poinsett, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Leonard Wood, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman. The ultimate civil-military mix across the greatly democratized and economically developed Latin American region in the coming century, however, will display a variety of possibilities, some of them not currently in existence anywhere. There will be traces of great Latin American civil-military visionaries, such as liberators Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, Manuel Belgrano (Argentina), Diego Portales (Chile), José “Pepe” Figueres (Costa Rica), and Alberto Lleras Camargo (Colombia).

There will exist a functional engagement between those who make, administer, and adjudicate the laws, and those who defend the national sovereignty, from Canada to Patagonia (Clinton). The Democratic Sustainment Course at the U.S. Army School of the Americas is part of the human machinery by which the U.S. policy of engagement for democracy and economic development is helping to create a Western Hemisphere free of wars and poised for social advancement in the coming century.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Russell W. Ramsey is currently Professor of Latin American Studies, U.S. Army School of the Americas, Ft. Benning, Georgia, as well as Professor, National Security Studies, Troy State University. Previously he served as Professor, National Security Affairs, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. While there he also was an adjunct professor at the University of Alabama and Auburn University at Montgomery. He was Director, Turner Job Corps Center, Albany, Georgia, and Director, Gainesville Job Corps Center, Gainesville, Florida. From 1969-1970 he was a Research Fellow, Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida. In his career as an Army officer from 1957-1969, he served in 101st Airborne Division, 11th Air Assault Division, and 1st Airborne Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Republic of Vietnam. He was also an instructor, U.S. Army School of the Americas and Army R.O.T.C., University of Florida. He has produced three novels, two biographies, sixty free lance articles, and one television script. He received his Ph.D. in Latin American History from the University of Florida.