

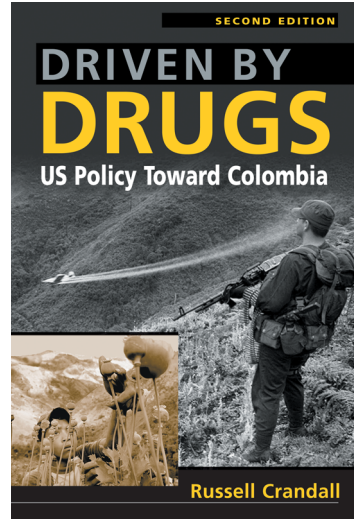
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Driven by Drugs: US Policy Toward Colombia

SECOND EDITION

Russell Crandall

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1

Introduction

FOR MOST OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, THE UNITED States sent the Colombian government limited funds in order to combat illegal drug production and trafficking. For example, in 1982 Washington sent US\$2.8 million. By 1994 the figure had risen to US\$26 million, still a paltry figure in terms of US foreign assistance sums. By 2000, however, these modest funding levels had become a thing of the past. In this year, President Bill Clinton signed a bill that allocated roughly US\$800 million for counternarcotics assistance in Colombia, making Colombia the third leading recipient of US foreign assistance in the world, behind Israel and Egypt.¹ In 2001 the incoming George W. Bush administration followed up on Clinton's request by approving another US\$400 million in annual aid for Colombia. Through President Bush's second term of office, the United States continued to send Colombia hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Indeed, as this dramatic increase in assistance makes clear, over the past two decades Colombia became one of the US government's overriding foreign policy concerns.

What is most apparent in the story of US policy toward Colombia is that US concerns in Colombia remained inextricably linked with a politically volatile issue that has its roots in the domestic political arena—the war on drugs. Colombia's virtual monopoly on the export of cocaine destined for the United States since the early 1980s made it the prime focus of US international narcotics interdiction efforts in subsequent years.

Complicating this foreign policy scenario is the fact that, in addition to the drug traffickers, leftist guerrilla insurgents who have been fighting in the countryside and provincial cities since the 1960s continued to be significant actors in this violent drama.² Moreover, during the 1990s and into this century, right-wing paramilitary groups launched an undeclared war on suspected civilian supporters of the guerrillas, destabilizing an already chaotic situation in Colombia. The issue was further clouded in more recent years

as these guerrilla and paramilitary groups increased their involvement in the drug trade, as well as expanded their operations in neighboring countries such as Ecuador and Venezuela.

This increasing violence and drug cultivation in Colombia coincided with the evolution of the US war on drugs. At the same time that the drug war was escalating in the 1980s and 1990s, the war against communists—the Cold War—was winding down. Consequently, the attention of the many US government agencies dealing with intelligence and military issues quickly turned from the Soviet Union to the drug war. This shift resulted in much greater US attention and scrutiny of events in drug-producing countries, especially those located in the Andes.

By the late 1980s, US international antidrug efforts began to focus on combating drugs at the source (i.e., the locales where drugs are cultivated) as opposed to interdicting them when they enter the United States. And since approximately 90 percent of the world's cocaine is produced in Colombia, this country became ground zero in the US war on drugs. Motivated by the domestic need to solve the drug problem, the United States increasingly found itself trying to fight a drug war in the middle of a country mired in a violent and complex civil conflict.

The term that analysts have used to describe the US government's seemingly unyielding focus on pursuing the drug war into Colombia is *narcotization*—that is, virtually all aspects of US involvement in Colombia were in some way linked to drugs. US policy in Colombia had been narcotized since the 1980s, when the international component of the drug war came into full swing. In turn, narcotization greatly influenced the US stance toward other key issues of its bilateral relationship with Colombia, such as human rights, economic ties, and the Colombian government's various attempts at negotiating peace with paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

This is not to say that the US policy of narcotization was static; rather, the US drug war agenda swung widely between the extreme policies of isolation and cooperation: when Washington believed that the Colombian government was cooperating on the drug front, relations were strong and the Colombian government was supported; when Washington felt that the Colombian government was not acting appropriately, relations quickly chilled or even froze, as was the case during Ernesto Samper's presidency (1994–1998). But regardless of whether relations between Washington and Bogotá were warm or cool, the underlying primacy of the drug war never wavered.

There have also been significant developments in the United States' approach to Colombia since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Indeed, US objectives in Colombia and the surrounding region moved well beyond drugs to include support for aggressive counterinsurgency efforts, mostly against left-wing Marxist insurgents. It merits mentioning that it was not just the United States' post-9/11 mind-set that propelled this new

approach; rather, over the past decade the rapidly changing nature of Colombia's conflict had a profound effect not just on Colombia's government and people, but also on policymakers in Washington. With Colombia seemingly under siege from drug-financed armed groups on the political left and right, the US government finally realized that total narcotization was not an effective or even preferable policy option. As we will see, narcotization remained alive and well, but only in a much broader, more complex framework that included the health of Colombia's democracy, terrorism, and regional security, especially with respect to Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.

In order to fully understand the nature of US policy in Colombia, it is necessary to trace the course of US involvement in Colombia all the way back to the early nineteenth century, when Colombia won its independence from Spain. What is readily apparent is that, before the United States began its drug war, the normal state of the US-Colombian relationship was relatively cordial in nature, free of much of the suspicion and animosity that often characterized US relations with other Latin American states. While a number of factors explain this unusually high level of cooperation between the two countries, one reason in particular is that both Bogotá and Washington shared the common goals of promoting political stability, economic growth, and most important, anticommunism.

This meeting of the minds gradually broke down as the US national interest in Colombia switched from fighting communists to fighting drugs. This meant that during the 1980s and 1990s cooperation was often replaced by suspicion, bilateralism with unilateralism. In more recent years, though, the relationship between Washington and Bogotá has been excellent. This has been due, in large part, to the convergence in ideological outlooks between President Bush and his conservative counterpart, Álvaro Uribe Vélez. In fact, upon taking office in 2001, and even before the events of 9/11, President Bush was an enthusiastic proponent of an aggressive strategy to support the Colombia government and military.

US Policy During the Samper, Pastrana, and Uribe Administrations

The Samper Administration, 1994–1998

During the years of Ernesto Samper's presidency, the US-Colombian bilateral relationship was deeply strained, and often a normal relationship barely existed. The drug war issue played an especially integral role in the policy process during this time, since virtually all US officials involved firmly believed that Samper's presidential campaign had received several million dollars from the Cali drug cartel. This focus on Samper exacerbated an

already delicate bilateral relationship as, for the first time since the drug war began in the 1980s, the United States shifted its counternarcotics strategies from focusing on arresting drug kingpins and interdicting drug production to aggressively and publicly attempting to bring down the scandal-ridden but democratically elected president of Colombia. This conflict made the relationship between the United States and the Samper administration one of the most abrasive episodes in US–Latin American relations since the end of the Cold War. This fact was probably best exemplified when the United States revoked Samper’s visa in July 1996, making him only the second head of state to receive this dubious honor.³

What also made this particular case interesting is that during the Samper years the US government did not consider Colombia a “crisis” foreign policy case, like Kosovo or North Korea were at the time; Colombia therefore did not receive the attention of high-level US foreign policy officials such as the secretary of state or the national security advisor. In fact, during these years there were only a few episodes when then secretary of state Warren Christopher publicly addressed an issue related to Colombia. Instead, US policy toward Colombia was overwhelmingly driven by upper-middle-level officials, chief among them the US ambassador to Colombia, Myles Frechette, and the assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement, Robert Gelbard.

In many ways, Frechette and Gelbard became US “viceroys” in Colombia—they formulated “Colombia policy” in a way that at times adhered to their own personal political agendas as much as it was any type of clearly formulated official US policy originating in Foggy Bottom. These officials gained, by default, an amount of power and influence that was inconsistent with the level of their positions. In this sense, the Samper era shows how the United States conducts policy in a client state when important domestic-driven factors such as the drug war are involved but when the country is not considered a foreign policy priority.

While US-Colombian relations were virtually frozen during the Samper years, this did not mean that the United States was unable to execute its policies. Rather, we have the interesting paradox that although US-Colombian relations during the Samper administration were at their lowest point in history, the United States was able to carry out its foreign policy toward Colombia—which at this time had become almost indistinguishable from US drug policy toward Colombia—quite successfully in terms of continuing to prosecute the war on drugs.

The solution to this puzzle is that Samper, lacking credibility on the drug issue due to suspected links to the Cali cartel, had little choice but to cooperate with US counternarcotics efforts, no matter how much he might have personally detested them. Furthermore, since the bilateral relationship became so polarized during Samper’s tenure, the United States was often

able to circumvent Samper and work directly with what it believed were trusted counternarcotics allies in Colombia's armed forces and national police. Consequently, the United States was free to pursue its foreign policy goals both within and outside the Samper administration.

There is no doubt that the US government was uncomfortable working with the Samper administration, but there was much more behind the deterioration in US-Colombian relations than just a moral stand by the United States. Rather, the US stance toward the Samper administration had almost as much to do with US counternarcotics policy as it did with whether Samper did indeed receive money from the Cali cartel.

First, many of the most damaging revelations related to Samper's trustworthiness came well after the United States had already decertified Colombia for not doing enough on the drug front. This leads one to believe that if Samper had better satisfied US counternarcotics demands the United States would have been more willing to overlook Samper's links to the drug cartels. Second, confronted with a strategy that had failed to curb the flow of narcotics into the United States, the State Department used the drug-tainted Samper administration as a convenient scapegoat to mollify a now Republican-controlled Congress that was demanding success on the drug front.

Conversely, by putting Samper on the defensive the United States was in fact able to exploit Samper's drug links by forcing him to do even more in the antidrug arena than he normally would have done had he never been suspected of receiving payments from the drug cartels. A reflection of the irony of this situation is that Ernesto Samper carried out Washington's wishes on the antidrug front with more vigor and success than any of his predecessors, including President César Gaviria (1990–1994), who was seen by many in Washington to be the archetype of a reliable antidrug ally.

After years of pursuing a set of policies that were intended to undermine Ernesto Samper's legitimacy as president of Colombia, the US government came to realize that its policies were producing unexpected counterproductive effects. Above all, the United States realized that its anti-Samper policies were weakening the institution of the Colombian presidency at the very time that, due to increased revenues from involvement in the drug trade, guerrilla groups and paramilitary organizations were becoming stronger than ever and were beginning to threaten the very survival of the Colombian state.

Indeed, by the end of Samper's term in office the civil conflict was entering into an unprecedented phase of wanton violence and bloodshed. And thus, after four years of focusing almost exclusively on how it could remove Samper from office, Washington now realized that it had to focus on the increasingly unstable situation in Colombia. Colombia had now become a crisis for the United States, mandating the need for a strong relationship with Bogotá, a move the United States had never deemed necessary during the Samper years. Fortunately for the United States, by this time Ernesto

Samper's term in office was just about over and Colombian law prevented him from running for reelection.

The Pastrana Administration, 1998–2002

Anxious to forget an era that was now considered counterproductive to the overall US objective in Colombia and eager to embrace a new administration that it could work with in order to manage what it now perceived to be a crisis in Colombia, the US government eagerly awaited the inauguration of Conservative Party candidate Andrés Pastrana in August 1998.⁴ Indeed, US officials were convinced that Pastrana was the reliable and pro-American president that they badly needed in order to repair the damage done to the bilateral relationship—and more important, to the US-led war on drugs—that occurred during the Samper years.

Yet while the Clinton administration received the newly elected president with open arms, the overwhelming US focus on drugs did not dissipate. Instead, the United States made Pastrana's cooperation on US-led drug efforts an underlying component of a warmer bilateral relationship. So while many aspects of Washington-Bogotá relations were significantly more positive than during the Samper years, narcotization did not end.

In 1999 the US government presented the Pastrana administration with an unprecedented US\$1.3 billion aid package that consisted primarily of military-related armaments intended to assist the Colombian government in rolling back the gains made by the guerrillas and drug traffickers during the previous several years. When this aid package was approved by the US Congress and signed into law by President Clinton a year later, the United States had embarked on the most costly and highest profile initiative in the history of the war on drugs.

By the end of the Pastrana administration, however, the overwhelming centrality of the war on drugs for US-Colombia policy had faded. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks radically altered US policy priorities. As President Pastrana's efforts to negotiate peace with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) collapsed, the Bush administration shifted Plan Colombia policy to focus more heavily on counterinsurgency.

The First Uribe Administration, 2002–2006

During the Uribe administration, US-Colombia relations reached unprecedented highs. In the context of the United States' unfolding global war on terrorism, President Uribe rearticulated the nature of Colombia's crisis as being that of a democratic state under threat from drug-trafficking terrorists. The Bush administration endorsed Uribe's hard-line policies and embraced him as a key ally in both the war on drugs and the war on terror.

The distinction between these two wars blurred as the narcotics trafficking activities of Colombia's illegal armed actors became increasingly evident. The Bush administration successfully lobbied Congress to dispose of Plan Colombia's restriction that aid be used only in support of counter-narcotics rather than counterinsurgency activities. This allowed the administration to provide critical assistance to the Colombian military as Uribe launched a massive military offensive against the FARC.

US involvement in Colombia's conflict steadily increased as the Bush administration provided increased funds, as well as US military and civilian personnel, to assist Uribe's counterinsurgency efforts. The only significant dispute between the Bush and Uribe administrations came when the Colombian president refused to extradite several paramilitary commanders in order to keep them engaged in peace negotiations. Yet, while US policy toward Colombia had broadened to include counterinsurgency, Plan Colombia's original counternarcotics goals remained central. Uribe proved a strong counterdrug ally, dramatically stepping up aerial eradication efforts.

Looking to the Future

As we will see in greater detail later on, even with the tremendous amount of aid that the United States has been pouring into Colombia each year, it remains unclear what this involvement will ultimately mean for the political and military situation in Colombia and for the future of the bilateral relationship. What is more certain, however, is that there will be tremendous bureaucratic pressure from within the US government to continue the drug war in some form or another. This is mostly due to the reality that over two decades the war on drugs has become institutionalized within the US government's policy process, an occurrence that necessitates continuous annual funding for US government agencies involved in antidrug efforts. The US war on drugs has taken on a life of its own, an inertial drive that will continue regardless of its success in actually reducing the amount of illegal drugs that enter the United States.

Upon leaving office, President Dwight Eisenhower warned the American public of the creeping "military industrial complex," a situation where continuous expenditures on strategic weapons to counter the threat from the Soviet Union would eventually require even greater amounts of spending regardless of the strategic reality. During the narcotized years starting in the late 1980s, with regard to the war on drugs, US policy might have been characterized as the "military industrial narcotics complex": the budgets of US government agencies involved in the drug war and the billions of dollars in military hardware that the United States sends to the Andes have become almost self-perpetuating. And now that we are well into the post-9/11 era, one could add narco-terrorism as another prime motivator of US policies in Colombia.

Contemporary US–Latin American Relations: Out of the Whirlpool?

US policy toward Latin America over the course of the past fifteen years perhaps can be best characterized by Peter Smith's label "the age of uncertainty."⁵ This phrase reflects the fact that there is no clear way to characterize the often vague and ill-defined characteristics of contemporary US policy toward Latin America. What is clear, however, is that the nature of US policy in the Western Hemisphere has changed dramatically following the end of the Cold War.⁶ Above all, the overriding US security and diplomatic priorities in Latin America are now increasingly linked to these "intermestic" issues (a clunky but useful term for describing the overlap between domestic and international concerns), such as immigration and the war on drugs.⁷

When the Cold War ended nearly two decades ago, some scholars of US–Latin American relations predicted that a new era would emerge in which multilateralism and dialogue would replace the coercion and unilateralism of the Cold War; others believed that the US policy toward Latin America in the post–Cold War era would essentially resemble that of the Cold War, the only difference being that instead of communists, new enemies would surely be devised by US policymakers to justify US hegemony in the region.⁸

Lars Schoultz is one of most vociferous of these scholars: "When the Soviet Union disappeared and US security interests no longer required the same level of dominance, Washington identified new problems—everything from drug trafficking to dictatorship to financial mismanagement—and moved to increase its control over Latin America."⁹ There are some who might take issue with Schoultz's conspiracy-theory depiction of US policy in Latin America in the 1990s, but there is nonetheless wide agreement that the United States no longer has the clear-cut framework of anticommunism to guide its hemispheric policies.¹⁰

The key to understanding the nature of the new phase in US hemispheric relations lies in the analysis of a crucial causal variable—the hegemonic presumption. The hegemonic presumption is the belief on the part of the United States that it has a right—and often an obligation—to intervene in the affairs of its own backyard, whether it be in the name of security, economic interests, or anticommunism.¹¹

As we will see, the case of Colombia suggests that the US hegemonic presumption continues in Latin America, but usually only when intermestic issues are involved. Several scholars of US–Latin American relations made the assertion during the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall that we could expect to see domestic issues like drugs and immigration replace communism as the US impetus and justification for continued influence in Latin America. Abraham Lowenthal, for example, has written:

Issues at the heart of US-Latin relations in the 1990s will increasingly be “intermestic”—based on the international spillover of domestic concerns and involving both international and domestic aspects and actors. . . . In sum, Latin America will be of heightened importance to the United States. For those who have seen the world almost exclusively in Cold War terms, the events of the past year have made Latin America seem virtually irrelevant, likely, as some say, to “fall off the map” of US concerns. But as US interests and energies turn inward to domestic challenges, Latin America may well be increasingly pertinent. Far from becoming irrelevant, Latin America’s problems and opportunities will be increasingly our own.¹²

While Lowenthal was correct in predicting the growing influence of intermestic issues in US–Latin American relations, we will still need to dig deeper into the US policymaking process to see exactly why and how particular intermestic issues might dominate US–Latin American relations in the coming decades.¹³

Robert Pastor’s work helps open up the “black box” of government decisionmaking in order to provide clues to the composition of intermestic issues.¹⁴ Specifically, Pastor divides US policymakers into two camps: “conservatives” and “liberals.” Conservatives uphold the national interest to the exclusion of any other and tend to see changes in the international system as direct threats to the national interest. On the other extreme, liberals do not believe that the national interest is inextricably linked to national identity and therefore often do not see the need for, say, military action to deal with external issues. Pastor writes:

Conservatives focus on a relatively narrower idea of US interests and a military-based definition of power. They believe that the United States should approach problems unilaterally and in a practical and forceful problem-solving manner. Liberals give higher priority to the moral dimension and to what Joseph S. Nye calls “soft power,” which derives from the American model. They look at social and economic causes of the crisis, try to understand the issues from the other’s perspective, and rely on multilateral, diplomatic approaches.¹⁵

The continual shifting of influence between the conservatives and the liberals can be clearly seen in the course of US policy in Latin America during the Cold War. The Organization of American States (OAS), John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and Jimmy Carter’s pro-human rights policies are just a few examples of the liberal approach to hemispheric relations.¹⁶ The 1954 CIA-backed overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Richard Nixon’s policies toward Socialist president Salvador Allende in Chile, and the policies of Ronald Reagan’s administration in Central America in the 1980s are examples of the conservative approach.¹⁷

The question then becomes one of which policy stance will dominate the post–Cold War era, especially in the “age of terror” following 9/11. The

case of Colombia definitely points toward the conservative approach, as the US war on drugs and counterinsurgency efforts more resemble a unilateral crusade. Yet paradoxically this might not mean that we should expect US policy in Latin America in general to be conservative. Rather, when certain hot-button intermestic issues are involved, we should expect the United States to act in a conservative manner; when no intermestic issues are involved, such as arms proliferation or disaster relief, we should expect US policy to be more liberal.

Before deliberating about whether US policy toward Latin America in the post–Cold War, post-9/11 era will be liberal or conservative, we first must ask whether the United States will even care about Latin America. Pastor’s framework of “introversion” versus “extroversion” is useful in that it explains how the United States tends to fluctuate between the introversion of focusing solely on domestic issues (isolationism) and the extroversion of focusing on international efforts such as World War II or the 1991 Gulf War.¹⁸

When this concept is applied to US policy toward Latin America, it appears that the US position will be one of introversion (i.e., neglect), unless a key intermestic issue is involved. If this is indeed the case, and if we assume that introversion tends to generate liberal foreign policies by default, we can expect US policy toward Latin America to be characterized by benign neglect and liberal policies, periodically disrupted by episodes of conservative interventions.

Once the liberal-conservative framework is taken into consideration, Lowenthal’s prediction that US policy in Latin America will be characterized by the “unilateral activist impulse” becomes easier to comprehend, as conservative episodes will surely provoke this type of intervention.¹⁹ Still, these impulses will be the exception and not the rule to US policy in Latin America; when they occur they usually will be driven by intermestic issues and will be intense and highly unilateral in nature. Tellingly, three of the most pressing US actions in Latin America since the end of the Cold War—the 1989 invasion of Panama (the only US post–Cold War invasion in Latin America), the 1994 intervention in Haiti, and the continued embargo against Cuba—can all be defined as being cases of intermestic issues driving intermittent “unilateral activist impulses” on the part of the United States.

Before analyzing contemporary US policy toward Colombia within this conceptual framework, we must first review the evolution of US policy in Colombia as well as the roots of Colombia’s narcotics trade and political violence.

Notes

1. Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, 2000.

2. See Russell Crandall, “The End of Civil Conflict in Colombia: The Military, Paramilitaries, and a New Role for the United States,” *SAIS Review* 19, no. 1 (Winter–

Spring 1999): 223–237; and Marc Chernick, “Negotiating Peace Amid Multiple Forms of Violence: The Protracted Search for a Settlement to the Armed Conflicts in Colombia,” in *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*, edited by Cynthia J. Arnson (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999), pp. 159–200.

3. The other head of state to have his visa revoked was Austrian president Kurt Waldheim in 1987.

4. Andrés Pastrana defeated Liberal Party candidate Horacio Serpa in June 1998.

5. See Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, pp. 217–248.

6. For an analysis of US–Latin American security models, see Augusto Varas, “From Coercion to Partnership: A New Paradigm for Security Cooperation in the Western Hemisphere,” in *The United States and Latin America in the 1990s: Beyond the Cold War*, edited by Jonathan Hartlyn, Lars Schoultz, and Augusto Varas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 46–63. See also Abraham F. Lowenthal, “Changing US Interests and Policies in a New World,” in *The United States and Latin America*, pp. 64–85.

7. See Desch, “Why Latin America May Miss the Cold War.”

8. See *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1997), a special issue on US–Latin American relations.

9. Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, p. xiv.

10. See Joseph S. Tulchin, “Hemispheric Relations in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 33–38; and Jorge Castañeda, “Latin America and the End of the Cold War,” *World Policy Journal* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 469–492.

11. See Abraham F. Lowenthal, “Ending the Hegemonic Presumption: The United States and Latin America,” *Foreign Affairs* 55, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 199–213.

12. Abraham F. Lowenthal, “Rediscovering Latin America,” *Foreign Affairs* (Fall 1990): 38.

13. See Lowenthal, “United States–Latin American Relations.”

14. Robert Pastor, *Whirlpool: US Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

16. For more on the Alliance for Progress, see Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*, pp. 142–162.

17. For more on the Guatemala case, see Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For the Reagan administration’s policies toward Central America, see Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976–1993* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 53–227. Democratic presidents were more than willing to carry out conservative policies, with Lyndon Johnson’s decision to invade the Dominican Republic in 1965 being one such example.

18. Robert Pastor, “The Clinton Administration and the Americas: The Postwar Rhythm and Blues,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1996–1997): 99–123.

19. Lowenthal, “Changing US Interests,” p. 69.