Tracing the Roots of Anti-Americanism in Latin America

Review by Michael Shifter

Alan L. McPherson. *Yankee No! Anti-Amer icanism in U.S-Latin American Relations.* Cam bridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 257 pp., $39.95

In April 2003, crowds gathered in the main plaza of Miraflores, a middle class district in Lima, to protest the U.S. mil itary action in Iraq. The mood was angry and the speeches were fiercely critical of the Bush administration. Yet, as the protest ended and Peruvians dispersed and went their separate ways, many were drawn to a nearby cinema to see either "Chicago" or "Gangs of New York." After the movies, they went out to grab a bite to eat at an adjacent Kentucky Fried Chicken or McDonald's.

Such ambivalence and the propensity to compartmentalize feelings towards the United States has historically character-ized inter-American affairs. Negative sentiments regarding U.S. policies and politics, for example, have not necessari ly implied similar views about U.S. cul ture, or even its economic system; the realms are separate, yet interrelated. Certain moments and crisis situations have severely tested this uneasy co-exis-tence of anti-American and pro-Ameri can attitudes. The Iraq war presents a clear example of such a moment.

Indeed, there is no shortage of surveys and analyses pointing to widespread anti-Americanism throughout the world today. In the minds of many, the Iraq war has only confirmed the worst stereotypes about U.S. militarism, unilateralism, imperialism, and exceptionalism. The widespread revival of terms such as "empire" and "hegemony" has been stunning. For much of the international community, preponderance of power has

meant that the United States can act capriciously in its own interests, with little regard for international norms and rules. Even before the United States carried out the Iraq invasion, the Bush administration's September 2002 National Security Strategy had outlined this assertive foreign policy concept in its new doctrine of "preemption."

While for much of the world the discussions about the projection of U.S. power may seem fresh, for Latin America and the Caribbean they are all-too-familiar. In this regard, the publication of Alan McPherson's *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* is exquisitely timed. Written after the 9/11 attacks but prior to the Iraq war, McPherson's scrupulous historical account and subtle treatment of inter-American relations illuminates the dilemmas and complexities posed by the multiple variants of anti-Americanism. His superb study can help interpret contemporary political realities and the strains and challenges of managing global affairs in a decidedly unipolar world. In fact, McPherson's three in-depth case studies—on Cuba (1959), Panama (1964) and the Dominican Republic (1965)—bear striking resemblance to the complicated relationships with Venezuela or Haiti in 2004. The parallels with prevailing mindsets in Washington and Latin America are uncanny, and compel one to ask how much really has changed and whether things have improved or deteriorated.

McPherson treats "anti-Americanism" precisely as it deserves to be treated—seriously, carefully, and with great sophistication. Although he acknowledges that it is a slippery concept prone to politicization and misuse by both the right and left, McPherson argues persuasively that anti-Americanism is a significant phenomenon—"an expression of a disposition against U.S. influence abroad"—that should not be jettisoned.[1] It has, after all, proven itself durable and has continued to profoundly shape international relations, perhaps more so today than ever before.

To date, efforts to quantify "anti-Americanism" have been unsatisfactory. Sensitive examinations of particular situations, however, provide much greater insight into the phenomenon. For McPherson, the cases of Cuba, Panama and the Dominican Republic exemplify different variants of "anti-Americanism" that have emerged historically in the region. He describes the anti-Americanism in Cuba in 1959 as "revolutionary," in Panama in 1964 as "conservative," and in the Dominican Republic in 1965 as "episodic." His analysis consistently deals with both sides of the relationship—the "anti-American" sentiment held and resulting strategy employed by various sectors in the particular society, and the response by the United States. The research is original, extensive, and meticulous. The Panamanian case sheds light on an interesting experience perhaps less well known than either the Dominican Republic or, surely, Cuba. The Cuban revolution, Panamanian riots, and Dominican intervention not only nicely illustrate the range of manifestations of anti-Americanism during the period of 1958-1965, but also, for McPherson, "together made up one of the most fascinating anti-U.S. sagas in the history of U.S. foreign relations."[2]

While McPherson notes the variability of anti-Americanism, he emphasizes its striking ambivalence. The love-hate relationship that reappears throughout the history of U.S.-Latin American relations is related to the asymmetry of power that

has long been a central feature of the hemispheric landscape. Such ambivalence also goes to the heart of the nature of American "exceptionalism" aptly described by sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset as a "double-edged sword."[3] This unique American belief blends, on the one hand, a sense of democratic openness and generosity and, on the other, unbridled moralism, sometimes bordering on intolerance. Given the powerful thread of American exceptionalism, it is hardly surprising that Latin Americans would often be torn in their feelings and attitudes regarding the United States.

To be sure, the relative strength of either anti-American or pro-American beliefs fluctuates depending on the circumstances. As McPherson argues, "In normal times, Latin American leaders, even fervent nationalists, juggled a variety of positive and negative perceptions toward the United States. Crises tended to intensify these perceptions, highlight their incompatibility, and test cultural and political loyalties to the United States."[4] Such an assertion especially rings true in the context of the Iraq war, when the United States expected unquestioning support and loyalty for its anti-terrorism agenda and objectives it judged necessary to protect its vital interests. Mexico and Chile, the two Latin American countries that served on the United Nations Security Council during the deliberations on Iraq, publicly opposed the U.S. decision to go to war—a stand that did not sit well with the Congress and, particularly, the Bush administration.

Although McPherson rightly notes the disparity in anti-American attitudes held by elite groups and the weight of public opinion in Latin America, that gap appears to have narrowed with the Iraq crisis. According to a November 2003 survey by Zogby International among key opinion makers in six Latin American countries, a startling 87 percent of the respondents had a negative opinion of President Bush.[5] The Latinobarómetro public opinion poll, which is carried out in 17 Latin American countries and reaches beyond elite sectors, revealed similar tendencies too.[6]

Whether such perceptions are justifiable or not, they nonetheless constitute a reality that should be taken seriously and be of utmost concern for officials in charge of U.S. Latin America policy. In reviewing the varied responses and degree of resilience displayed by Washington in dealing with anti-Americanism, McPherson's insights are particularly acute and instructive. He argues that the initial U.S. reaction to Fidel Castro's revolution was largely counterproductive, bordering on panic, and if anything helped fuel his movement's anti-Americanism. In contrast, the Johnson administration responded more sensitively and skillfully to the violence that erupted in Panama in 1964, exhibiting a pragmatic understanding of the particular variant of hostility towards the United States and

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thereby successfully defusing the tension. Indeed, one of the principal lessons derived from this book is that, in trying to address the difficult problems associated with anti-Americanism, Washington's style and attitude are often as important as substantive policy. President Lyndon Johnson's conciliatory statement in March 1964 seems simple enough: "We are well aware that the claims of the Government of Panama, and of the majority of the Panamanian people, do not spring from malice or hatred of America." Yet, McPherson suggests this made all the difference in the world: "Here, finally, was the public carrot that Panamanians had been waiting for, at least in tone: recognition and appreciation of anti-U.S. ambivalence."[7]

It is no doubt tempting to emphasize the constants—including the remarkable continuity in U.S. attitudes towards Latin America and the Latin American resistance and opposition to U.S. power.[8] But it is crucial as well to recognize the moments when the rougher edges of U.S. hegemony have been softened, and Latin American demands have at least been partially addressed. *Yankee No!* contains a fine account of the Kennedy administration and its attempt, through such advisers as historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for example, to engage more seriously and broadly with Latin America's intellectual community. While such initiatives as the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps were no doubt calculated to counter the appeal of Castro's regime, they nonetheless projected a commitment to Latin America's social agenda.

The administration of George H. W. Bush (1988–1992) also pursued a variety of initiatives that, while they did not transform the hemisphere's essential power relations, nonetheless reflected a serious and welcome effort to identify common interests between the United States and Latin America. The first Bush administration effectively took advantage of the opportunity that accompanied the end of the Cold War to engage the region on several fronts, thereby assuaging the virulent anti-Americanism that resulted in the strain and discord of the preceding decades. With solid U.S. backing, the Organization of American States approved a landmark resolution in June 1991 that meant that any interruption in democratic, constitutional rule would become a matter of regional concern and would trigger a hemispheric response. In Latin America, the United States began to build higher levels of credibility and trust on the democracy issue. Further, the notion of creating a hemisphere-wide free trade area—Latin American leaders had expressed keen interest in securing greater access to U.S. markets for their products—can also be traced to the first Bush administration. Even the two multilateral summits held with President Bush and his Andean counterparts marked a shift in approach and style, if not substance, on

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the highly sensitive drug question.

Unfortunately, much of the goodwill generated in Latin America during the first Bush administration—and sustained to a large extent during the Clinton years—has dissipated during the second Bush administration. The resurgence of anti-American sentiment, expressed in the growing distrust towards the United States, can be attributed in part to the region's disappointing economic and political performance since the late 1990s, and continuing into the 21st cen tury. The 1998 election of strongman Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the entrenched authoritarianism of Peru's Alberto Fujimori, and the general economic malaise of the late 1990s ran counter to political and economic pro jections. In the early 1990s, few expected economic stagnation and political insta bility to characterize Latin America a decade later. Throughout the region, there has been a sense that the United States could be more constructively engaged and helpful in buttressing sectors committed to the sort of economic and political reform Washington has long advocated.[9]

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon only created greater distance between the United States's and the Latin American agendas. Senior Washington policymakers focused chiefly on Iraq and the Middle East—the principal theater of the war on terrorism—and became less and less engaged with hemi spheric concerns. Perhaps no country suffered a more severe letdown after 9/11 than Mexico, which had developed high expectations about reaching an ambitious immigration accord with the United States. In addition, Washington's cavalier indifference towards Argentina's financial and political meltdown in December 2001 elicited strong criticisms through out Latin America. The fact that the Bush administration initially responded to the April 2002 coup in Venezuela with undisguised delight did little to enhance its credibility as a strong defender of democracy.

With the Iraq war, the distraction of senior officials away from Latin America became increasingly evident, as resources were reallocated to reflect global priorities. In addition, the Manichean "you're either with us or against us" formulation that followed in the wake of 9/11 and had echoes of the Cold War, acquired even greater force as the U.S. military operation got underway. The already wide disconnect between the U.S. and Latin American agendas grew wider still. Feeling ignored and powerless, Latin Americans sought to tweak the United States in any way possible. At the June 2003 meeting of the OAS in Santiago, Chile, where Secretary of State Colin Powell talked about the global anti-terrorist campaign and made remarks that hinted of "regime change" in Cuba, member states for the first time since 1959 failed to elect a member from the United States to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.[10] In this context, Costa Rican president José Figueres's remark after then vice president Richard Nixon was assaulted in Caracas, Venezuela during a 1958 visit seems apt: "People cannot spit on a foreign policy, which is what they meant to do."[11]

More than four decades later, the highly charged anti-American rhetoric of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez seems like a throwback to an earlier period. Sharp, public verbal exchanges between Chávez and U.S. officials have tended to play into Chávez's hands, only enhancing his standing among Venezue-

lans—along with some disillusioned Latin Americans. The best measure of the rise of anti-Americanism throughout Latin America may be the solicitous treatment extended to Fidel Castro in recent visits in the region. Such treatment has less to do with an embrace of Castro's Cuba than it does a frustration with the thrust of U.S. policy—in Latin America and the world—and its relative inattention to the region's primary social concerns.

Moreover, the Caribbean has recently witnessed a surge in anti-Americanism. Already resentful and bitter that it seems invisible to Washington, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has sharply disagreed with the United States over the ouster of Haitian president Jean Betrand Aristide in March 2004. That CARICOM has failed to accede to U.S. pressure to recognize the new Haitian government, and has in fact called for a UN inquiry into the U.S. role in Aristide's departure, signals a substantial rift that could well complicate any U.S. effort to mobilize broad support on other hemi spheric questions.

The key question is how Washington will respond to such an accumulating list of grievances and concerns coming from Latin America and the Caribbean. As McPherson describes, the attack on Nixon in Caracas in 1958 forced the U.S. to rethink its approach toward the region. "Caracas was a much-needed shock treatment," Nixon said, "which jolted us out of dangerous complacency."[12]

History has taught us that, despite for midable obstacles, the United States has the resources at its disposal to mollify some of the virulent anti-Americanism that has recently returned to the surface in Latin America. Yet, one wonders what it will take, nearly half century after Nixon's Caracas visit, to stimulate similar soul-searching and bring an effective response from Washington. In the end, it may be less important whether they like us than whether "they" matter at all.

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NOTES

1 Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in US-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

2 Ibid., 3.

3 Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

4 McPherson, 7.

5 University of Miami School of Business/Zogby International Poll (2003). "A Poll of Opinion Leaders in Latin America," Internet, http://www.zogby.com.

6 "The Stubborn Survival of Frustrated Democrats," *The Economist* (30 October 2003).

7 McPherson, 111.

8 Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and C. Wright Mills. *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960).

9 Michael Shifter, "The U.S. and Latin America Through the Lens of Empire," *Current History* (February 2004): 61–67.

10 Michael Shifter, "A Policy for the Neighbors," *New York Times* (17 July 2003).

11 McPherson, 9.

12 Ibid., 11.