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Cuba Evokes the History of American Imperialism in Latin America

By Cody Cain

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As President Barack Obama makes history as the first sitting U.S. president to visit Cuba since 1928, we find ourselves reflecting upon our historic relationship with Latin America.

We were all taught in school that America is a great and kind nation that promotes freedom and democracy around the world. And many still drink the Kool-Aid of how America can do no wrong.

History, however, paints a rather different picture.

Latin America has suffered grievously as a result of the unfortunate circumstance of being located in the same neighborhood as the mighty empire of the United States. This is really no different from subjugated territories of other empires in history, such as the Roman Empire, or the Ottoman Empire. It is no fun living in the shadow of imperial domination because the empire exploits you. And if you step out of line, you are crushed like a bug.

The island of Cuba has had a particularly rough time when it comes to being exploited.

Cuba's misfortune dates back to around 1500 with the historic journey of Christopher Columbus sailing from Spain across the Atlantic Ocean to "discover" America. Columbus found his way to Cuba and the Spanish conquistadors quickly invaded it and colonized it.

This Spanish occupation of Cuba lasted for 400 years. Yikes. Similar to the American Revolution in which American colonists sought freedom from Britain, so too the Cuban colonists began their own Cuban War for Independence to seek their freedom from Spain.

But alas, for at the last minute in 1898, the United States under President William McKinley swooped in and intervened in the Cuban revolution under the Spanish-American War. The U.S. military, including the soon-to-be president Theodore Roosevelt and his "rough riders," took over Cuba, supposedly freeing it, but through diplomatic and military manipulation, effectively subjugating it.

The United States also snatched-up Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines from Spain in this Spanish-American War, and thus was born the imperial American empire expanding beyond its shores.

America self-righteously congratulated itself for spreading the wonders of freedom and democracy to other countries in the world. The "liberated" countries, however, did not quite experience the "liberty" part. Crushed were the hopes of the Cuban people for their own freedom.

For the next sixty years, the American empire dominated Cuba by exploiting its natural resources and using the Cuban population to perform the manual work by pressing them into the servitude of cheap labor.

The Cuban people, however, still yearned for their freedom, and the United States was repeatedly forced to send in the military to crush popular protests. But sending in the military every time was difficult, expensive, and inefficient.

Plus, this does not bode so well back home in America. There is a credibility problem when attempting to proclaim that America is promoting democracy and freedom in these foreign countries when America is continually forced to send in its military to maintain this form of "democracy." After all, it's not exactly freedom when it is imposed by American gunpoint.

In a tribute to the ingenuity of American capitalism, the playbook was expanded to address this little problem and devise an ideal solution: the dictatorship.

Voila! A dictatorship would enable America to continue to reap for itself all of the benefits from exploiting these foreign countries, while simultaneously covering-up the dirty little downside of the violent oppression and making it all less visible to the American public.

The playbook is very simple. The foreign country remains as a separate "sovereign" nation, thereby creating the false appearance that it is independent and free. But a ruler is installed who

is favorable to American interests. And America provides generous foreign aid to the country so the ruler can maintain internal “stability” and “law and order.”

The expectations of the ruler in return are very simple and pretty much focused on two roles. First, the ruler must ensure that the foreign country enacts and maintains local laws that are very favorable to American corporations seeking to exploit the foreign country for profit.

Typically, this includes enacting laws that help push local people off their land in favor of vast corporate ownership, suppressing individual rights and labor rights to ensure a system of servitude, privatizing industries so the corporations can reap the profits, minimizing any measures in favor of the public interest, and squashing any sort of environmental laws and other corporate regulations.

The second role of the ruler is to use the generous foreign aid from America to build-up the internal military and police forces and use them not for national security, but instead, for brutally suppressing its own population to keep the people obedient to the American corporations and under the servitude of cheap labor.

The ruler is expected and required to employ any means necessary to maintain this internal “stability” and “law and order.” Of course, this almost always means a brutal and violent repression of those in the civilian population who dare to question this illegitimate structure of power, including systemic imprisonment, kidnapping or disappearances, torture, rape, and murder.

Now, why in the world would any ruler do such a disastrous thing in his own country and to his own population?

Simple. Wealth and power. That’s all it takes.

In exchange for performing the role of keeping the country “stable” and subservient to American corporations, the ruler is permitted to accumulate enormous sums of money. Sometimes the ruler skims directly from America’s foreign aid. But often the ruler enriches himself through a form of corruption by taking a cut of the profits from the American corporations that are exploiting his country. The ruler accumulates vast sums of wealth unto himself while leaving his own population in abject poverty.

The ruler is also granted a wide latitude to rule supreme over his country with absolute authority, much like a king with no accountability. As long as the ruler does not infringe upon the interests of the American corporations, the ruler is free to impose his will upon his own population, including imprisoning, raping, and murdering with impunity to maintain his grip on power. This intoxicating amount of power is an irresistible incentive for the ruler to kowtow to the American corporations.

This, in a nutshell, is the system of the dictatorship. It is quite an effective form of rule. It is a win-win situation. America wins, the American corporations win, the foreign countries remain

“sovereign,” America is spared from having to send in its own military while still dominating these countries, and the dictators win. How wonderful.

Well, actually, the one group of people who do not win are the civilian populations in these countries. They lose. They lose big-time. And, of course, they just so happen to comprise the overwhelming majority of the population.

The civilian people are forced into miserable circumstances at no fault of their own. They are exploited for cheap labor. Their land is appropriated by the corporations. They are forced to live in poverty. And they are deprived of education, opportunity, and self-fulfillment.

They are helpless to do anything about it. If they take steps against this power structure and seek to improve their situation, they are systematically beaten, kidnapped, jailed, raped, tortured, and murdered. And they have no recourse against such treatment. There is no system of justice to protect them. The dictator controls the police, the prosecutors, and the courts. So the people have no place to turn for help. And this is no accident. The system is specifically designed to prevent the people from having any recourse to justice in order to keep them in servitude.

So after sending the military into Cuba a few times, America decided to give a whirl to this little system of a dictatorship. With America’s backing, General Fulgencio Batista rose to power in the 1930s as Cuba’s new dictator, and this kicked-off an era of great cooperation and success between America and Cuba that lasted for three decades. How wonderful.

American corporations rushed into Cuba and took over industry after industry. They took over the sugar industry and sold the sugar back to America, which accounted for over 90% of Cuba’s total sugar exports. American corporations acquired lands, mines, factories, oil refineries, the telephone utility, the electricity utility, railroads, hotels, you name it. Great American fortunes were made from extracting wealth out of Cuba, and the dictator Batista enriched himself lavishly from his cut of the action.

But the people of Cuba throughout the land were left suffering in poverty, and anyone who had dared to question this power structure had been mercilessly executed or imprisoned by Batista.

This environment of repression and exploitation is what eventually produced the popular uprising under Fidel Castro.

Castro led a revolution against this illegitimate power structure. In 1959, Castro overthrew the Batista dictator, who fled Cuba with a personal fortune estimated at over \$300 million and lived out the remainder of his days in luxury in Spain and Portugal until his natural death in 1973.

The purpose of Castro’s revolution was to free Cuba from domination, and instead operate Cuba as a free and independent nation for the benefit of the Cuban people, including the poor people.

For the first time since 1500, Cuba was now its own free nation.

Castro took back assets that had been owned by the American corporations. Land, sugar mills, the telephone and electricity utilities, and many other properties were expropriated and taken over by the Cuban government. The American corporations had suddenly lost about two thirds of their private investments in Cuba, so they were outraged.

The Cuban revolution resulted in America losing its property in Cuba, just like the American revolution in 1776 had resulted in Britain losing its property in America. This is what happens in revolutions.

But America was not going to stand for this disobedience to the empire. Castro's seizure of American assets kicked-off a severe and violent response. America committed itself to nothing less than the total destruction of Cuba through a systematic siege of strangulation.

America would take advantage of Cuba's geography as a small island by cutting-off all supplies into Cuba and blocking all exports out of Cuba in an attempt to cause Cuba's utter ruination and collapse. Never mind the enormous suffering that this would impose upon the innocent civilian population of Cuba.

Actually, imposing this enormous suffering upon the innocent people of Cuba, in fact, was the whole point. Not very nice.

This is what led to the American-backed embargo against Cuba, and the severing of all relations between America and Cuba that lasted for over fifty years. It is this isolation and attempted strangulation of Cuba that President Obama is now seeking to bring to an end.

To be sure, Cuba under the Castro government has not exactly been a wonderland. Cuba is not a democracy and the Castro regime has indeed repressed its political opponents. But the Castro regime did not just arise out of thin air for no reason. Rather, it was a predictable reaction to the ruthless oppression imposed in Cuba by the American empire.

And Cuba, it turns out, was no isolated example.

On the contrary. In fact, the playbook for the Batista dictatorship in Cuba served as something of a successful little business model that could be replicated in country after country in Latin America (and elsewhere around the world).

America imposes a dictator and supplies generous foreign aid. The dictator brutally represses the population with murder, disappearances, imprisonment, rape, and torture to create an environment of "stability" conducive to American corporate exploitation free from labor unrest and corporate regulation. The dictator earns a personal fortune in return. And all of this is backed by the might of the American military in the background if needed. In the process, of course, the civilian populations are oppressed, dehumanized, and subjected to horrendous suffering.

This didn't just happen by accident. This wasn't just a fluke. This didn't just happen once or twice. No. This business model was replicated over and over again, in country after country.

Guatemala is another prime example of the playbook. In 1931, the United States backed the rise to power of President Jorge Ubico, who then permitted the United Fruit Company (today known as Chiquita bananas) from America to utterly plunder the nation. This eventually led to a revolt by the people and a democratically elected government in 1944. But in 1954, the CIA overthrew this democratically elected government and installed a new dictator, which kicked-off the Guatemalan Civil War that lasted for almost forty years and resulted in 200,000 deaths and disappearances and countless atrocities, including the genocide of the indigenous Mayan population.

Brazil is another prime example with the American-backed coup d'état in 1964 that overthrew the elected government and installed a hand-picked dictator. Within two years of the coup, American corporations controlled about half of Brazil's industry.

Chile was another doozy. In 1970, the people elected the socialist president Salvador Allende. United States President Richard Nixon, however, did not wish to see socialism take hold so America immediately began working to overthrow Allende. The Chilean military marched against him, and in the end, holed-up in the presidential palace, Allende delivered his final address and committed suicide. General Augusto Pinochet seized power and became the ruthless dictator of Chile for about two decades. Under Pinochet, it is estimated that 80,000 political opponents were jailed, 30,000 were tortured, and thousands were murdered or disappeared.

Panama was another example. The territory that is Panama today was previously part of Columbia, now its neighbor to the east. The United States desired to build the critical Panama Canal and proposed a transaction to Columbia, but Columbia rejected the deal. Apparently, Columbia failed to appreciate that this was an offer it could not refuse. America was not about to stand for this disobedience.

Instead of outright invading Columbia and seizing the territory surrounding the canal location, the United States accomplished its objectives through a variation of the typical playbook.

In 1903, under President Theodore Roosevelt, the United States caused Panama to break-away from Columbia and become its own independent nation, which, of course, would be obedient to the United States. Columbia was outraged, but the United States sent a few war ships into the area just to clear things up for Columbia. Gunboat diplomacy.

And thus the new nation of Panama was born. It became a protectorate of the United States, and it granted the United States the right to build and own the Panama Canal, which ownership lasted for almost 100 years.

Of course, you still must continue to obey the boss, otherwise you'll be in trouble. The dictator of Panama Manuel Noriega learned this the hard way. When he refused to obey, United States President George H. W. Bush conducted a military invasion of Panama in 1989, deposed Noriega, and sent him to prison where he languishes to this day.

Latin America is filled with example after example of this sort of American domination, over and over again. Part of the underlying cause was the Cold War between America and Russia in

which America sought to prevent socialist or communist governments from emerging in Latin American countries. But America's quest for democracy conversely led to the overthrow of democratically elected governments and the imposition of brutal dictators.

Over and over again leftist-leaning governments elected by the common people were overthrown by military strongmen who implemented horrendous regimes of murder, disappearances, rape, imprisonment, and torture, including Paraguay in 1954, Bolivia in 1971, Uruguay in 1973, and Argentina in 1976. And, of course, President Ronald Reagan intensified this activity during the 1980s with his support of brutal regimes in countries like Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Honduras is a contemporary example that is currently underway today. The president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, began pursuing progressive, left-leaning policies, such as raising the minimum wage and helping the poor. Always dangerous. This is not friendly to corporations. And thus in 2009, he was deposed in a coup d'état.

The coup was widely condemned internationally, including by the United Nations, which called for the immediate restoration of President Zelaya. But Hillary Clinton, as the U.S. Secretary of State, effectively supported the coup by instead calling for a new election and supporting the coup regime.

So who was behind the coup? Well, in the aftermath of the coup, human rights abuses in Honduras became an atrocious problem with murders, kidnappings, imprisonment, torture, and rape against people like labor activists, environmentalists, journalists, human rights lawyers, political opponents, and peasant activists. As a case in point, two prominent activists in Honduras were just recently assassinated.

So the coup in Honduras sure looks like the same old routine of big business installing a brutal regime that will suppress the population in order to ensure a favorable business environment for corporate profits.

This is happening in present day right under our noses, and in Hillary Clinton's case, with the support of the leading candidate to become the next president of the United States.

All of this violence and oppression in the region has been utterly devastating to these countries. Not only has it repressed the civilian populations and fostered anger and resentment, but it has also destroyed institutions, dismantled governing structures, and plunged these nations into chaos, thereby setting back progress for decades.

It is no wonder there is so much animosity against the United States across the entire region of Latin America.

Many of those in the United States who oppose Obama's initiative to reestablish relations with Cuba loudly proclaim that America should continue the embargo against Cuba on the grounds that Cuba is not a "democracy," and Cuba denies "freedom" and "human rights."

But what about all of the dictators imposed by America in numerous countries throughout Latin America, including in Cuba, who have denied “democracy,” “freedom,” and “human rights” for decades?

Never mind any of that stuff about American Imperialism. These opponents prefer to stick to their favorite rosy tale of American Exceptionalism.

But the reality is that American Imperialism in Latin America is a significant problem that America must address in order to achieve peace and harmony in the world.

Obama’s current initiative to attempt to improve relations with Cuba is a great place to start.