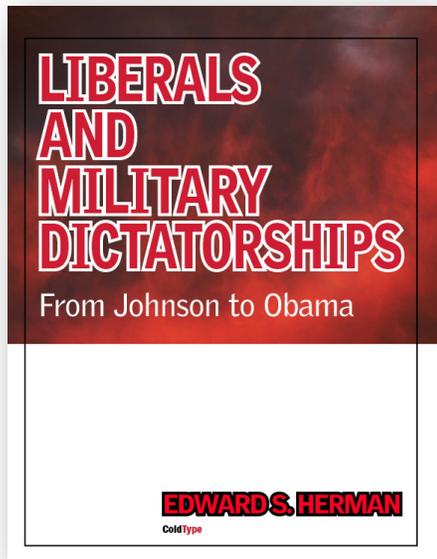


LIBERALS AND MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS

From Johnson to Obama

EDWARD S. HERMAN

ColdType



THE AUTHOR

Edward S. Herman is Professor Emeritus of Finance at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and has written extensively on economics, political economy and the media. Among his books are *Corporate Control*, *Corporate Power*, *The Real Terror Network*, *Triumph of the Market*, *Manufacturing Consent* (with Noam Chomsky) and *Imperial Alibis* (SouthEnd Press).

© Edward S. Herman 2010

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

www.coldtype.net

LIBERALS AND MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS

EDWARD S. HERMAN

Back in 1971, the military dictator of Brazil, General Emilio Medici, commented somewhat regretfully that “The economy is doing fine but the people aren’t.” Of course he was claiming at the same time that the people would some day do better under military rule. But that was pie in the sky. It was the very design of the Brazilian military dictatorship to keep the people down, atomized, and exploitable in the interest of the elite that had supported and participated in the 1964 overthrow of civilian rule (the local elite, the transnationals, and the Brazilian and U.S. military establishments).

The unions and social democratic parties were dismantled and the “people” deprived of any organizational protection and made fearful. A classic Catholic Church document of the late 1960s was titled “The Cry of the People.” In the description of the military regime in another Church document, the development model put in place was said, by its brutal treatment of the masses, to have “created a

“

It was the very design of the Brazilian military dictatorship to keep the people down, atomized, and exploitable in the interest of the elite that had supported and participated in the 1964 overthrow of civilian rule

revolution that did not exist.” The upward redistribution of income was dramatic, not only in Brazil but in the other National Security States brought into existence with U.S. support in the 1960s and later (for details, Herman, *The Real Terror Network*, chap 3; Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People*; on Brazil, Jan Black, *United States Penetration of Brazil*). But these regimes did provide a temporary “stability,” explained clearly by the Finance Minister of the Argentine military dictatorship in 1977: “This plan can be fulfilled despite its lack of popular support. It has sufficient political support...that provided by the armed forces.”

It is of great interest and importance that the emergence, growth and even dominance of the National Security State in Latin America, complete with the widespread prevalence of death squads and torture, and the “marginalization of a people” (the title of another church document), took place in the U.S. backyard and with crucial U.S. initiative and support.

It is also notable that U.S. liberals

were in the forefront in advancing this marginalization process. Lyndon Johnson was President when the democratically elected Juan Bosch was overthrown in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and replaced by a regime of terror, with U.S. help. And Johnson was President, and very much active, in the earlier, and even more significant, 1964 displacement of a democracy with a military dictatorship in Brazil. Maybe the most famous line describing that murderous transfer of power was the statement by Johnson's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Lincoln Gordon, that the Brazilian "revolution" of 1964 was "the single most decisive victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century." Lincoln Gordon subsequently became president of Johns Hopkins University.

Quite a few of the real terror network regimes were ended and displaced with civilian rule in the 1980s and 1990s, although the heavy U.S. hand in Central America left that area devastated and with problematic and regressive politics up to the present day. But as we know from reading Michael Ignatieff in the New York Times, the United States once again "changed course" and took on the task of "democracy promotion" in the early 21st century. According to Ignatieff: "The democratic turn in American foreign policy has been recent. Latin Americans remember when the American presence meant backing death squads and military juntas." And "In the cold war, most presidents opted for stability at the price of liberty when they had to choose." But the turn had come, and George Bush is the first president who has "actually risked his presidency on the premise that Jefferson might be right [in his notion that one day the U.S.



Maybe the most famous line describing that murderous transfer of power was the statement by Johnson's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Lincoln Gordon, that the Brazilian "revolution" of 1964 was "the single most decisive victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century"

democratic model will be spread 'finally to all'].¹" ("Who Are Americans to Think That Freedom Is Theirs to Spread? http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/ksgnews/Features/opeds/062605_ignatieff.htm", NYT, June 26, 2005) Ignatieff knew that this change of course had occurred because George Bush said so.

This democratic thrust under Bush was also claimed by George Packer. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Packer asserted, during the Bush years, that "No one should doubt that he and his surviving senior advisers believes in what they call the 'forward strategy of freedom,' even if they've had to talk themselves into it... By now... it is clear that, however, clumsy and selective the execution, Bush wants democratization to be his legacy."

Packer tells us that no one should "misjudge his sincerity," and that arguing that it is a cover for an "American power grab... is not a good position for the opposition to be in, either morally or politically. The best role for critics in the president's second term will be not to scoff at the idea of spreading freedom but to take it seriously—to hold him to his own talk." ("Invasion Vs Persuasion," *The New Yorker*, December 20/27, 2004: http://newyorker.com/talk/content/?041220ta_talk_packer).

And in his edited volume *The Fight Is For Democracy*, Packer, along with Michael Tomasky, argues for a continuation of democracy promotion as central to U.S. foreign policy, allegedly less worrisome with Democrats in power than under Bush-Cheney because the Democrats are more reliable pursuers of freedom! (For a discussion of this nonsense and faux-history, see my review of Packer's book in *Z Magazine*, "Liberals in Search

LIBERALS AND MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS

of a Foreign Policy,” Dec. 2003: <http://musictravel.free.fr/political/political42.htm>)....

Now, with a liberal Democrat in power once again, we are once again “changing course” (a joke, as we didn’t really turn course under W. despite the idiocies of Ignatieff and Packer). Of course, Honduras is our prime illustration of non-change, as it is a throw-back to the 1964 Brazilian triumph of freedom, and El Salvador’s “high turnout” election of 1982, but it is also droll to see President Obama announce 30,000 more troops for Afghanistan, with not the slightest indication of request from or clearance with Hamad Karzai, the newly elected President of the sovereign state of Afghanistan!

The election in Afghanistan was even admitted in the mainstream media to be rather badly flawed, but their indignation was not great (as it was for the Iranian election) and of course they don’t suggest that this discredits the U.S. war and escalation in that country. The U.S. right to invade, occupy and kill at a distance is a given for the U.S. and NATO establishment.

Honduras is more interesting, with a relatively liberal U.S. president, elected with solid support from majority antiwar forces, supporting the June 28, 2009 military coup that ousted a democratically elected president in a throwback to the National Security State years.

It is claimed that there is conflict within the Obama foreign policy ranks over how to deal with Honduras, but it is clear that the administration knew that the coup was going to happen and did nothing to stop it, and Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was actually



It is claimed that there is conflict within the Obama foreign policy ranks over how to deal with Honduras, but it is clear that the administration knew that the coup was going to happen and did nothing to stop it

shipped out of his country through the U.S. base in Honduras.

It is also clear that while there have been occasional verbal criticisms of the coup, and even penalties, the United States, and effectively its leader Barack Obama, has stood alone, supported only by a few reliable Latin clients, Panama, Costa Rica, and Colombia, in accepting the coup.

The United States did support a Costa-Rica brokered deal that would have allowed Zelaya to resume office briefly before the November 29 election, but that deal broke down and the election was held under siege conditions, with two candidates running who supported the coup and were hostile to the populist forces that Zelaya had come to represent. This election is a coup-ratification effort, with no alternative candidates and under conditions of state terrorism. As Amnesty International reported as early as August 2009:

Since Zelaya was overthrown by the military in June, 4,000 people have been arrested, hundreds beaten <https://owa.wharton.upenn.edu/owa/redirect.aspx?C=95d947cd6ea14ca48e37b5cd995f4d03&URL=http%3a%2f%2ftakeaction.amnestyusa.org%2fsiteapps%2fdvocacy%2findex.aspx%3fc%3djhKPIXPCIoE%26b%3d2590179%26template%3dx.ascx%26action%3d12929> and hospitalised and dozens charged with sedition. Yet more have been kidnapped, raped, tortured, “disappeared <https://owa.wharton.upenn.edu/owa/redirect.aspx?C=95d947cd6ea14ca48e37b5cd995f4d03&URL=http%3a%2f%2fquixote.org%2fexecutive-summary-cofadeh-report-human-rights-abuses>” and assassinated. Independent media <https://owa.wharton.upenn.edu/owa/>

[redir.aspx?C=95d947cd6ea14ca48e37b5cd995f4d03&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.amnesty.org%2fen%2fnews-and-updates%2ffeature-stories%2fjournalists-honduras-they-know-who-we-are-20090930](https://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates%2ffeature-stories%2fjournalists-honduras-they-know-who-we-are-20090930) has fared little better. Anti-coup TV and radio stations have been raided by the army and forced off air; their broadcasting equipment confiscated or destroyed with acid. In one case, journalists leapt from third-floor windows to escape the soldiers. Yet Hondurans have continued marching, striking, blocking roads – and meanwhile getting used to day and night curfews, the smell of tear gas and the grief for friends and family members murdered by the coup regime. They have been struggling https://owa.wharton.upenn.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=95d947cd6ea14ca48e37b5cd995f4d03&URL=http%3a%2f%2f21stcenturysocialism.com%2farticle%2fhonduras_the_hooded_face_of_dictatorship_01870.html, not merely to protest at the trampling of their democratic rights, but also because of the hope which Zelaya had begun to inspire. (AI, Honduras:human rights crisis threatens as repression increases, Aug. 2009: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR37/004/2009/en> .)

From June 28 to November 3, an estimated 21 protesters and anti-coup leaders were killed by the police and armed forces. There has been no U.S. official protests at this violence and these killings, and the media have been virtually silent. We may recall the publicity given the killing of a woman protester, Neda Agha-Soltan, in Iran, but dead protesters in Honduras are not merely not made heroes and heroines, they don't exist. This of course allows the Honduran election to be made



We may recall the publicity given the killing of a woman protester, Neda Agha-Soltan, in Iran, but dead protesters in Honduras are not merely not made heroes and heroines, they don't exist

credible and sets the stage for coup-normalization.

The New York Times has once again done an outstanding job of protecting a coup and putting a “demonstration election” in a good light. Reporter Elizabeth Malkin has provided “news” articles on the Honduras election that are classics in the apologetic vein: “Conservative Poised to Win In Honduras” (Nov. 30, 2009) and “Fate of Ousted Leader Clouds Election Results in Honduras” (Dec. 1, 2009). They are also throwbacks to the Times’s performance in the Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984 and the Nicaraguan election of 1984.

The Salvadoran elections were, like Honduras’s, held under conditions of state terror, with nobody allowed to run who represented ordinary people or opposition to war—and the New York Times in 1982 suppressed the fact that the Salvadoran army had actually prepared a death list of 138 liberals and leftists, who naturally did not run for office. The propaganda line of U.S. and Salvadoran officials was that as the opposition did not support the election and even called for non-voting, the voter turnout was a valid measure of government and opposition support.

And the army was the good guy that “supported” the election (even if it did kill many thousands of civilians). The large Salvadoran turnout was heavily featured in the mass media; the election was a success; we had a fledgling democracy! For Nicaragua in 1984, there was no terror and the turnout was also large; but this was a Sandinista-run election and the media did not feature the turnout. The New York Times declared that election a “sham.”

Elizabeth Malkin plays the same

LIBERALS AND MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS

game in reporting on the Honduras election as her paper did for El Salvador. She says nothing about the absence of an opposition leader in the election, but she mentions victor Porfiro Lobo's claim that he will call for a "grand national dialogue" before taking office.

With respect to the well-documented state terror, including mass arrests, violent disruption of protests, and killings, Malkin says "There was a visible police and military presence around the capital..." Deep in her first article she mentions that "human rights groups denounced the patrols as part of a campaign of intimidation." And witnesses reported police misbehavior at a resistance gathering in San Pedro Sula. But she gives no quotes from human rights groups or the 70 or more election observers, or data on police-army violence, or anything about attacks on dissident media. The election results are not "clouded" by either the absence of an electoral opposition party or by state terror.

Malkin even cites one source that suggested that Zelaya supporters "could try to disrupt the voting." And in the "turnout" tradition, Malkin says that "Much of the suspense appeared to hang on how many of Honduras's 4.6 million voters would turn up rather than who they would vote for."



**So it is
coup-time
once again
in the U.S.
backyard, with
an accelerated
class war
by violence,
protected once
again by the
mainstream
media**

She of course doesn't mention inducements and pressures to vote, just as her paper never did in El Salvador in 1982. The photo accompanying her November 30 article shows two nuns peaceably voting in Honduras. Can you imagine such a photo being shown during the election in Iran? Can you imagine Malkin showing the police beating up a protester or the dead body of a Honduran police victim? (Among other sources, AI offered many photos of police and army violence in the run-up to the election, but the Times and mass media in general were not interested.)

So it is coup-time once again in the U.S. backyard, with an accelerated class war by violence, protected once again by the mainstream media. The economy is doing poorly in Honduras and the people are doing worse. But the hope of the Honduran elite is that the populist measures pushed by Zelaya can be more-or-less permanently put on ice, so that the economy itself might recover while the people don't.

For the U.S. elite, the hope is that Honduras, returning to the U.S.-ultra-client status, along with the new military bases in Colombia, and greater U.S. attention to Latin America, might turn the tide toward the "economy" and away from populism and "the people." It would be sad if this hope is realized.

**WRITING WORTH
READING FROM
AROUND THE WORLD**

ColdType

www.coldtype.net