

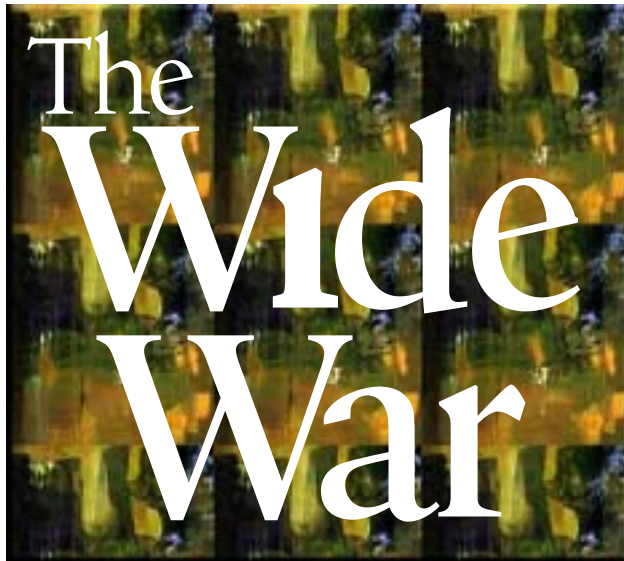
The Wide War

ColdType

**HOW DONALD RUMSFELD
DISCOVERED
THE WILD WEST
IN LATIN AMERICA**



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This essay originally appeared on tomdispatch.com

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INTRODUCTION

By Tom Engelhardt



REG GRANDIN'S latest essay offers us a vision of Donald Rumsfeld's "Wild West" in Latin America; or, put another way, how to potentially mess up a second region of the world as we are presently so intent on doing in the Middle East. Plunge in. It's well worth the odyssey he takes you on into the strategic brain of the Pentagon and the "lawless" world of Latin America's tri-border area.

Then check out his new book, *Empire's Workshop*. It's a history of how American imperial power, soft and hard, was first tested out and honed south of our border. More important, though, it's the necessary, almost forgotten history of how, in the early 1980s, American conservatism became an internationalist, expansionist movement – without which our recent history in Iraq and elsewhere makes a lot less sense.

It was in Central America, remember, that President Ronald Reagan first actively faced off against the "Evil Empire." It was

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through Central American policy that the previously distinct strands of conservatism and neoconservatism first broke foreign bread (and foreign heads) together. It was the anvil upon which the ideas and constituencies that drive Bush's aggressive foreign policy today were first hammered out. It was the place that secular neocons and anti-communist militarists came together with the Christian New Right to oppose Catholicism's Liberation Theology, which, for them, was the radical Islam of its moment – at a time when Reagan's CIA director was playing footsie in Afghanistan and elsewhere with the Islamic jihadists who would later be melded with the “axis of evil” into the War on Terror.

Central America was also where Republicans first embraced the idealist language of spreading “democracy” abroad as a key justification for an aggressive, violent, preemptive foreign policy. It was in relation to Central America that, through the Office of Public Diplomacy, the executive branch first used a full range of PR “perception management” techniques to sell a war – again anticipating the media manipulation that led to the invasion of Iraq. Finally, it was in what became the Iran-Contra scandal that Republicans first tried to bypass many of the restrictions on the presidency put into place (however feebly) after Vietnam and Watergate, foreshadowing the vast, half-secret expansion of executive powers in the last five years. Not for nothing did so many of the current administration's officials and hangers on – John Negroponte, Elliot Abrams, Otto Reich, Donald Kagan, Michael Ledeen, even John Bolton – come out of Central America. It is a story that must be read

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How Donald Rumsfeld Discovered the Wild West in Latin America



How fast has Latin America fallen from favor? Just a decade ago the Clinton administration was holding up the region as the crown jewel of globalization's promise: All is quiet on "our southern flank," reported the head of the US Southern Command, General Barry McCaffrey, in 1995, "our neighbors are allies who, in general, share similar values." "The Western Hemisphere has a lot to teach the world," said McCaffrey's boss, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, two years later, "as the world reaches for the kind of progress we have made."

Today, with a new generation of leaders in open rebellion against Washington's leadership, Latin America is no longer seen as a beacon unto the world but as a shadowy place where "enemies" lurk. "They watch, they probe," Donald Rumsfeld warns of terrorists in Latin America; they look for "weaknesses." According to the new head of Southcom General Bantz Craddock, the region is held hostage by a league of extraordinary gentlemen made up of the "transnational ter-

rorist, the narco-terrorist, the Islamic radical fundraiser and recruiter, the illicit trafficker, the money launderer, the kidnapper, [and] the gang member.”

“Terrorists throughout the Southern command area of responsibility,” Craddock’s predecessor warned, “bomb, murder, kidnap, traffic drugs, transfer arms, launder money and smuggle humans.” Problems that Clinton’s Pentagon presented as discrete issues – drugs, arms trafficking, intellectual property piracy, migration, and money laundering, what the editor of *Foreign Policy* Moisés Naín has described as the “five wars of globalization” – are now understood as part of a larger unified campaign against terrorism.

The Pentagon’s Wide War on Everything in Latin America

Latin America, in fact, has become more dangerous of late, plagued by a rise in homicides, kidnappings, drug use, and gang violence. Yet it is not the increase in illicit activity that is causing the Pentagon to beat its alarm but rather a change in the way terrorism experts and government officials think about international security. After 9/11, much was made of Al Qaeda’s virus-like ability to adapt and spread through loosely linked affinity cells even after its host government in Afghanistan had been destroyed. Defense analysts now contend that, with potential patron nations few and far between and funding sources cut off by effective policing, a new mutation has occurred. To raise money, terrorists are reportedly making common cause with gun runners, people smugglers, brand-name and intellectual-property bootleggers, drug dealers, blood-diamond merchants, and even old-fashioned high-seas pirates.

In other words, the real enemy facing the U.S. in its War on Terror is not violent extremism, but that old scourge of American peacekeepers since the days of the frontier: lawlessness. “Lawlessness that breeds terrorism is also a fertile ground for the drug trafficking that supports terrorism,” said former Attorney John Ashcroft a few years

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ago, explaining why Congress's global counterterrorism funding bill was allocating money to support the Colombian military's fight against leftist rebels.

Counter-insurgency theorists have long argued for what they describe as "total war at the grass-roots," by which they mean a strategy not just to defeat insurgents by military force but to establish control over the social, economic, and cultural terrain in which they operate. "Drying up the sea," they call it, riffing on Mao's famous dictum, or sometimes "draining the swamp." What this expanded definition of the terrorist threat does is take the concept of total war out of, say, the mountains of Afghanistan, and project it onto a world scale: Victory, says the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, "requires the creation of a global environment inhospitable to terrorism."

Defining the War on Terror in such expansive terms offers a number of advantages for American security strategists. Since the United States has the world's largest military, the militarization of police work justifies the "persistent surveillance" of, well, everything and everybody, as well as the maintenance of "a long-term, low-visibility presence in many areas of the world where U.S. forces do not traditionally operate." It justifies taking "preventive measures" in order to "quell disorder before it leads to the collapse of political and social structures" and shaping "the choices of countries at strategic crossroads" which, the Quadrennial Defense Review believes, include Russia, China, India, the Middle East, Latin America, Southeast Asia – just about every nation on the face of the earth save Britain and, maybe, France.

Since the "new threats of the 21st century recognize no borders," the Pentagon can, in the name of efficiency and flexibility, breach bureaucratic divisions separating police, military, and intelligence agencies, while at the same time demanding that they be subordinated to U.S. command. Hawks now like to sell the War on Terror as "the Long War," but a better term would be 'the Wide War,' with an enemies list

infinitely expandable to include everything from DVD bootleggers to peasants protesting the Bechtel Corporation. Southcom Commander Craddock regularly preaches against “anti-globalization and anti-free trade demagogues,” while Harvard security-studies scholar and leading ideologue of the “protean enemy” thesis, Jessica Stern, charges, without a shred of credible evidence, that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is brokering an alliance between “Colombian rebels and militant Islamist groups.”

A Latin American Wild West

In Latin America, the tri-border region of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, centered on Paraguay’s legendary city of Ciudad del Este, is ground zero for this broad view of global security. It’s the place where, according to the Pentagon, “all the components of transnational lawlessness seem to converge.” The region had been on the Department of Defense watch list ever since two Lebanese residents were implicated in the 1992 and 1994 Hezbollah bombings of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

Right after 9/11, Douglas Feith, Pentagon Undersecretary and neo-con ultra, suggested that the U.S. hold off invading Afghanistan and instead bomb the tri-border region, just to “surprise” al-Qaeda and throw it off guard. Attention to the region increased after U.S. troops discovered what CNN excitedly called “a giant poster of Iguazu Falls” – Latin America’s most visited tourist destination, a few miles from Ciudad del Este – hanging on the wall of an al-Qaeda operative’s abandoned house in Kabul. Since then, security analysts and journalists have taken to describing the place as a “new Libya,” where Hamas raises money for its operations and al-Qaeda operates training camps or sends its militants for a little R and R.

Rio may have its favelas, Mexico its Tijuana, and Colombia its jungles overrun by guerrillas, drug lords, and paramilitaries, but none of these

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places hold a candle to the tri-border zone. It is truly the last, or at least the most well-known, lawless territory in the Americas, the War on Terror's very own "Wild West," as one military official dubbed it.

The Pentagon's overheated definition of the terrorist threat melts away distinctions between Shiites from Sunnis or either from Marxists. Thus, we have former CIA director James Woolsey claiming that Islamic extremists and criminals in the tri-border region work together "sort of like three different Mafia families," who occasionally kill each other but more often cooperate. Jessica Stern says that there "terrorists with widely disparate ideologies – Marxist Colombian rebels, American white supremacists, Hamas, Hezbollah, and others – meet to swap tradecraft." In Ciudad del Este, "international crimes like money laundering, gunrunning, migration fraud, and drug trafficking," according to military analyst Colonel William Mendel, "recombine and metastasize." The proceeds of these various illicit trades reportedly arm Latin America's leftist guerrillas, fund Islamic terrorism, and enrich the Russian, Asian, and even Nigerian mafias – everybody, it seems, but the Corleone family. Rumors drift through the Pentagon's world that Osama bin Laden even turns a nice profit running untaxed cigarettes into Brazil.

It's difficult to assess the truth of any of these lurid allegations. The second largest city in South America's second poorest country, Ciudad del Este is a free-trade boomtown, home not only to roughly 30,000 Lebanese and Syrian migrants but to lots of Koreans, Chinese, and South Asians, many of them undocumented. The city is no doubt a "free zone for significant criminal activity," as former FBI director Louis Freeh once described it. Its polyglot streets are packed with money changers, armored cars, and stalls selling everything from bootlegged *War of the Worlds* DVDs and dollar-a-pop Viagra to the latest sermons by respected Shiite Imams. Everyday, more than 40,000 people cross the International Friendship Bridge from Brazil, many

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looking for brand-name knockoffs either for personal use or for resale on the streets of Rio or São Paulo. Surrounded by porous borders and crisscrossed by river routes linking the continent's interior to the Atlantic, the city is certainly a trading post for Andean cocaine, Paraguayan marijuana, Brazilian weapons, and dirty money.

But security experts have found it a distinct stretch to link any of this criminal activity to al-Qaeda. A couple of years ago, for example, senior U.S. Army analyst Graham Turbiville pointed to the purchase of 30,000 ski masks by a Ciudad del Este Lebanese businessman as evidence that terrorism was flourishing in the region. The transaction, he said, "raised many questions" – one of which was whether Turbiville was even aware that some of the world's best skiing takes place in the nearby Andes.

Newspaper accounts depicting the region as Osama's lair are inevitably based not on investigative reporting but on the word of Pentagon officials or analysts, who either recycle each other's assertions or pick up rumors circulated in the Latin American press – stories many Latin Americans insist are planted by the CIA or the Pentagon. Brazilian and Argentine intelligence and police agencies, which have done much to disperse tri-border criminal activity elsewhere, insist that no terrorist cells exist in the area.

Ciudad del Este is thick with spies from Israel, the U.S., various Latin American countries, and even China. "There are so many of us," an Argentine spook recently remarked, "that we are bumping into each other." If any of al-Qaeda's operatives were actually prowling the city, odds are that at least one of them would have been found by now. Yet the State Department says that no "credible information" exists confirming that the group is operating in the tri-border region, while even Southcom chief Brantz Craddock admits that the Pentagon has "not detected Islamic terrorist cells" anywhere in Latin America.

Establishing Dominion over Ungoverned Spaces

Whether or not bin Laden's deputies kick back at Iguazu Falls with skinheads and Asian gangsters to trade war stories and sip mate, the specter of this unholy alliance provides plenty of cover for the Pentagon to move forward with its militarization of hemispheric relations, even as nation after nation in the region slips out of Washington's political and economic orbit.

According to the Department of Defense, the hydra-headed terrorist network now supposedly spreading across southern climes cannot be defeated if Latin American nations continue to think of criminal law enforcement and international warfare as two distinct activities. What is needed is a Herculean Army of One, a flexible fighting machine capable of waging a coordinated war against criminal terrorism on all its multiple fronts and across any border. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld regularly tours the region urging security officials to break down bureaucratic firewalls in order to allow local police, military and intelligence services to act in an integrated manner. The goal, according to the Pentagon, is to establish "effective sovereignty" or, more biblically, "dominion" over "ungoverned spaces" – boundary areas like the tri-border region, but also poor city neighborhoods where gangs rule, rural hinterlands where civil institutions are weak, and waterways and coastlines where illegal trafficking takes place.

So far, the Pentagon has had the most success in implementing this program in Central America and Colombia. In Central America, the Bush administration has pushed the region's defense ministers to set up a multinational "rapid-response force" made up of military and police officers to counter "emerging transnational threats." Such a force, the formation of which is underway, worries human rights activists, who have worked hard since the region's fratricidal civil wars of the 1980s to strictly limit military mandates to the defense of

national borders.

According to Adam Isacson, who monitors Washington's Colombia policy for the Center for International Policy, the U.S. is "carrying out a host of activities that would have been unthinkable back in 2000." Then, the Clinton administration promised that no portion of its \$4 billion counter-narcotic funding package would be used to fight leftist rebels. In 2002, however, a newly emboldened Republican Congress tucked money into its global counterterrorism funding bill to support Colombia's counterinsurgency program. Since then, the Pentagon has increasingly taken the lead in directing what is now being called a "unified campaign" against cocaine and guerrillas. Over the last couple of years, the number of U.S. troops allowed in country has doubled to 800. Some of them teach Colombian police officers light-infantry training tactics, skills usually associated with low-intensity warfare, not civilian law enforcement; but many are involved in directly executing Colombia's counterinsurgency offensive, coordinating police and military units, and providing training and intelligence support for mobile brigades and Special Forces.

Well-armed Diplomacy

In Latin America more generally, it is increasingly the Pentagon, not the State Department, which sets the course for hemispheric diplomacy. With a staff of 1,400 and a budget of \$800 million, Southcom already has more money and resources devoted to Latin America than do the Departments of State, Treasury, Commerce, and Agriculture combined. And its power is growing.

For decades following the passage of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, it was the responsibility of the civilian diplomats over at Foggy Bottom to allocate funds and training to foreign armies and police forces. But the Pentagon has steadily usurped this authority, first to

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fight the War on Drugs, then the War on Terror. Out of its own budget, it now pays for about two-thirds of the security training the U.S. gives to Latin America. In January 2006, Congress legalized this transfer of authority from State to Defense through a provision in the National Defense Authorization Act, which for the first time officially gave the Pentagon the freedom to spend millions from its own budget on aid to foreign militaries without even the formality of civilian oversight. After 9/11, total American military aid to the region jumped from roughly \$400 million to more than \$700 million. It has been steadily rising ever since, coming in today just shy of \$1 billion.

Much of this aid consists of training Latin American soldiers – more than 15,000 every year. Washington hopes that, even while losing its grip over the region's civilian leadership, its influence will grow as each of these cadets, shaped by ideas and personal loyalties developed during his instruction period, moves up his nation's chain of command.

Training consists of lethal combat techniques in the field backed by counterinsurgency and counter-terror theory and doctrine in the classroom. This doctrine, conforming as it does to the Pentagon's broad definition of the international security threat, is aimed at undermining the work civilian activists have done since the end of Cold War to dismantle national and international intelligence agencies in the region.

Chilean General Augusto Pinochet's infamous Operation Condor in the 1970s, for example, was in effect an international consortium of state intelligence agencies that served as the central command for a continental campaign of political terror, compiling execution lists of left-wing activists, while coordinating and directing the work of police, military, and death-squad units throughout Latin America. Condor was dismantled when Chile returned to civilian rule in the early 1990s. However, a similarly integrated system is exactly what the newly established Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program, run (with

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no Congressional supervision) out of the Pentagon's Office of Special Operations and Low Intensity Warfare Conflict, evidently hopes to restore. Every year the Program's curriculum encourages thousands of select Latin American Fellows to return to their home countries and work to increase the "cooperation among military, police, and intelligence officials" and create "an intelligence sharing network with all other governments in the region."

During the Cold War, Washington urged Latin American soldiers to police their societies for "internal enemies," which anti-Communist military regimes took as a green light to commit mass slaughter. Today, the Pentagon thinks Latin America has a new "internal enemy": Southcom's General Craddock recently told a class of Latin American cadets at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (née School of the Americas, the alma mater of some of the region's most infamous executioners) to be on guard against anti-free trade populists who "incite violence against their own government and their own people."

Osama at the Falls

Outside Washington's sphere of influence in Central America and Colombia, the Bush administration is finding most Latin American militaries a hard sell. Since the end of the Cold War brought sharp reductions in their budgets, the region's cash-starved armed forces eagerly take U.S. money, training, and equipment, and regularly participate in Pentagon-led conferences, war games, and military maneuvers. Police agencies work with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security to combat money laundering as well as gun- and drug-running operations.

But most regional security officials have snubbed Washington's attempt to rally them behind a broader ideological crusade. Two years

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ago at an inter-American meeting of defense ministers in Quito, Ecuador, Rumsfeld's Latin American counterparts rejected a proposal that they coordinate their activities through Southcom. Chile's defense minister insisted that the UN is the "only forum with international legitimacy to act globally on security issues." "We are very good at taking care of our borders," sniffed Argentina's defense minister in response to Rumsfeld's claim that borders don't matter in a world of stateless terrorism. They likewise rebuffed a U.S. plan to draw up a regional list of suspected terrorists to prevent them from obtaining visas and traveling between countries.

In contrast to the Pentagon's attempt to ratchet up a sense of ideological urgency, the region's military leaders have sounded quite a different note. "The cause of terrorism," said Brazil's José Alencar, "is not just fundamentalism, but misery and hunger." When the U.S. delegation at the meeting pushed for "narco-terrorism" to be ranked the hemisphere's number-one challenge, the Latin Americans balked, insisting that poverty was the major threat to stability. From the sidelines, the former head of Ecuador's armed forces mordantly observed that in "Latin America there are no terrorists – only hunger and unemployment and delinquents who turn to crime. What are we going to do, hit you with a banana?"

During the Cold War, Washington was able to mobilize fear of Communism – which for Latin America's political and economic leaders generally translated into fear of democracy – and so make its particular security interests seem like the region's collective security interests. Today, a majority of South Americans not only oppose the U.S. occupation of Iraq, but refuse to get too worked up about terrorism in general. Polls have repeatedly revealed, not surprisingly, that poverty is their major concern.

Last year, a publicity foray by the Brazilian tourist town of Foz de Iguaçu, just outside of Ciudad de Este, to capitalize on its post-9/11

notoriety captures just how untroubled so many Latin Americans are by Islamic terrorism. Its city government ran full-page advertisements in leading newspapers featuring a photograph of Osama bin Laden above the caption: “When he’s not busy blowing up the world, bin Laden takes a few days to relax at Iguazu.” Asked about the ads, a city spokesperson explained, “Where there is laughter, there is no terror.”

In sharp contrast to the unanimity with which the hemisphere sequestered Cuba during the Cold War, the region’s governments have roundly rejected the Bush administration’s attempts to redefine Venezuela as a pariah state. Brazil, in fact, signed a “strategic alliance” with Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez last year, promising military cooperation and economic integration, including joint projects on energy development.

The region’s refusal to follow Washington’s various leads on a whole range of issues reflects a broadening rift over economic issues, undercutting Washington’s ability to cast the War on Terror as a common struggle. More and more Latin Americans – not just the poor and the outspoken who marched against Bush during last year’s Summit of the Americas in Argentina, but many of the region’s elites – understand that the free-market orthodoxy promoted by the U.S. over the last two decades has been the very font of their problems. In one country after another, national elections in recent years have brought to power a new Latin America left sharply critical of unbridled capitalism. Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Bolivia, among other countries, are now working together to contest Washington’s hemispheric authority.

A Train Wreck of a Policy

Even the Pentagon acknowledges that the “roots” of Latin America’s “poor security environment” can be found in the “hopelessness and squalor of poverty.” At times, it goes so far as to admit, as Southcom

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did in its most recent annual report, that the “free market reforms and privatization of the 1990’s have not delivered on the promise of prosperity.” But rather than build on this insight to trace, say, the connections between financial liberalization and money laundering or to examine how privatization and cheap imports have forced rural peasants and urban workers into the informal, often illegal, economies in areas like the tri-border region, the Department of Defense is now openly positioning itself as globalization’s Praetorian Guard, making the opening up of markets across Latin America a central objective of its mission.

During the Cold War, the Pentagon had a surprisingly small physical presence in Latin America. Except for some Caribbean bases, its strategists preferred to work through local allies who shared their vision of continental security. But the failure to rally Latin America behind the War on Terror, combined with the rise of economic nationalism, has led the Pentagon to return to more historically traditional methods of flexing its muscle in the region. It has recently been establishing in the Caribbean and the Andes a chain of small but permanent military bases, known euphemistically as “cooperative security locations.” The Pentagon also calls them “lily pads” and from them imagines itself leapfrogging troops and equipment, shifting its weight from one “pad” to another as crises dictate to project its power deep into Latin America.

This is where the obsession with Ciudad del Este comes in. With Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela acting in unison to temper U.S. ambitions, corrupt and repressive Paraguay is the new darling of the Bush administration. In 2003, Nicanor Duarte became the first Paraguayan head of state to be hosted by the White House. In August 2005, Donald Rumsfeld flew to Asunción, the first time a Secretary of Defense visited Paraguay. That trip was shortly followed by a meeting between Dick Cheney and his Paraguayan counterpart.

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Even though the terrorist threat reportedly emanating from the tri-border region has yet to be substantiated, it serves as an effective stalking horse, topping the agenda not only of these high-level meetings but of every ministerial gathering sponsored by Southcom. And the drumbeat is producing some rain.

Last summer, Paraguay, over the angry protests of its neighbors, invited the Pentagon to begin eighteen months of bilateral military exercises, training local troops in “domestic peacekeeping operations,” small-unit maneuvers, and border control. Washington and Asunción insist that the training mission is only temporary, yet observers point to the U.S.-built Mariscal Estigarribia air base in the northern part of the country, capable of handling large-scale military air traffic, as an indication that the Bush administration is there to stay. If so, it would give Washington its southernmost bridgehead in Latin America, within striking distance not just of the storied Ciudad del Este, but of the Guarani Aquifer, one of the world’s largest bodies of fresh water, not to speak of Bolivia’s important natural gas reserves.

At the moment, it is ridiculous to say, as Gen. Craddock recently did, that “transnational terrorism” is Latin America’s “foremost” problem. Then again, Iraq was not a haven for Islamic jihadists until our national security establishment made it so.

The Pentagon today is pursuing a train-wreck of a policy in the region. It continues the march of free-market absolutism, which its officials insist, despite all evidence to the contrary, will generate economic opportunities and rein in crime. At the same time, as it did during the Cold War, it is going forward with the militarization of the hemisphere in order to contain the “lawlessness” that such misery generates; and, once again, it is trying to rally Latin American troops behind an ideological crusade. So far, the region’s officer corps has refused to get on the bandwagon, but Washington’s persuasive powers are considerable. If those in charge of the Bush administration’s

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hemispheric diplomacy continue down these tracks, the disaster that waits may very well transform much of Latin America into the Ciudad del Este of their dreams, the wild west of their imaginations.



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