

The
SCHOOL
of the AMERICAS



*Military Training
and Political Violence
in the Americas*

LESLEY GILL

The School of the Americas

AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS/
GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

*A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph
and Emily S. Rosenberg*



This series aims to stimulate critical perspectives and fresh interpretive frameworks for scholarship on the history of the imposing global presence of the United States. Its primary concerns include the deployment and contestation of power, the construction and deconstruction of cultural and political borders, and the complex interplay between the global and the local.

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CONTENTS



List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Prologue: The Teflon Assassin	xiii
Introduction: The Military, Political Violence, and Impunity	i
Chapter 1: Georgia Not on Their Minds	23
Chapter 2: De-Mining Humanitarianism	43
Chapter 3: Foot Soldiers of the U.S. Empire	59
Chapter 4: Pathways to Power	90
Chapter 5: Strategic Alliances	110
Chapter 6: Human Wrongs and Rights	137
Chapter 7: Disordering the Andes	163
Chapter 8: Targeting the “School of Assassins”	198
Conclusion: The School of America	233
Notes	245
References Cited	259
Index	271

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS



1. School of the Americas.	25
2. Georgia state flag, 1999.	34
3. The fascist salute.	63
4. A 1950s Army cartoon depicts white fears of racial degeneration in the Panamanian tropics.	67
5. Salvadoran soA graduate Col. Natividad de Jesús Cáceres Cabrera. . .	84
6. Salvadoran soA graduate Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson.	84
7. Peasant leader Evo Morales.	172
8. Peasant coca growers of the Six Federations.	175
9. Peasants relaxing after a night of preparing road blockades.	176
10. Militarized policemen confront coca growers on a Chapare bridge. . .	177
11. soA graduate Col. Mario Montoya.	183
12. Street mural shows the effects of fumigation.	185
13. The hardy coca bush.	196
14. Father Roy Bourgeois leading anti-soA protest.	205
15. Former Salvadoran Defense Minister Vides Casanova.	206
16. Anti-soA protesters organized by Witness for Peace.	209
17. Witness for Peace delegate and soA advisory board member Ken Little.	214
18. Anti-soA demonstrators stage a "die-in."	217
19. Giant puppets at anti-soA protest.	217

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Finally, this book is dedicated to the memory of those Latin Americans who were murdered, tortured, and disappeared by the security forces, and to the peasant coca growers of the Andes who fight against incredible odds to live in peace and dignity. My hope is that the book will contribute to building the kind of world that so many of them have struggled to create—a world based on equality, justice, and accountability.

PROLOGUE



The Teflon Assassin

Meet it as I set it down

That one may smile and smile and be a villain.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Luis Bernardo Urbina Sánchez. So this is him, I thought to myself, not knowing what to expect. I had been anticipating our meeting for several days—wondering what he was like, how I would interview him, and why he would agree to talk to me about his career. Across from me sat the retired Colombian general, an alleged murderer and paramilitary coordinator during his long cold war career in the army.¹

The fifty-eight-year-old man did not look like an army officer, much less someone accused by international human rights organizations of terrible crimes. He wore dark slacks, a sport jacket, and a tie. Longish black hair speckled with gray curled from beneath a cloth cap and covered the nape of his neck. A neatly trimmed, full beard softened the lines of his face. Tortoiseshell glasses framed his large brown eyes, and a pleasant smile spread across his face when he shook my hand. There was nothing unsettling about this attractive, middle-aged man. How, though, does one recognize a killer—dark aviator glasses, a pencil-thin mustache, a permanent scowl, an arrogant swagger, and a protruding gut? Urbina possessed none of the stereotypical features of the brutish Latin American army officer. He reminded me less of the stiff, uniformed men who strode the corridors of the Colombian defense ministry than of my male colleagues in academia.

He glanced around the room as I fumbled with my tape recorder, but he made no attempt at small talk. Folding his hands on the table, he sat up straight, smiled, and waited for me to begin. Urbina was the last of a series of Colombian, Honduran, and Bolivian alumni from the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA) whom I interviewed during the summer of 2001. He was doing his old friend, Nestor Ramírez, a favor. The two men had trained at the SOA together in 1985, and General Ramírez—now the second-in-command of the Colombian armed forces—had asked him to talk to me. Ramírez wanted to showcase Colombian SOA graduates who had stellar careers in the top ranks of the military, but the human rights violations attributed to Urbina were apparently irrelevant to the commander and left him unimpressed; indeed, Ramírez himself stood accused of a 1986 revenge slaying that was never investigated.² Perhaps Urbina, for his part, also wanted to use me to proclaim his innocence. He would soon tell me that his hands were clean and that he had nothing to hide.

"So why don't you tell me about your military career," I asked.

Luis Urbina did not want to be a soldier, he said. His father owned a modest cattle ranch and had worked hard as a veterinarian in the small Colombian town of Nemocón to support a large family of ten children—five girls and five boys. Luis and his brothers were like other provincial young men of their generation whose families expected them to pursue careers in the army or the priesthood. Luis chose the latter and studied in a seminary until he was eighteen. Then, as he tells the story, he "fell in love with a girl." The unplanned consequences of this romance got him kicked out of the seminary and thinking about a career in the army. It was not long before he was packing his bags and heading to the military academy in Bogotá. His army training lasted several years, and when he finished in the mid-1970s, he began a series of postings around the country.

Urbina walked me step-by-step through his career and his rise through the ranks. He spoke in a matter-of-fact manner that demonstrated little eagerness to enhance his image as a key player in the Colombian army's long war against leftist insurgents. He was engaging and urbane, and he spoke in an easy, relaxed manner. There was no reason to posture: he was, after all, a general, and he knew that I understood the importance of rank.

Urbina rose to head the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) from within the Colombian army's secretive intelligence apparatus.³ He spent much of his career with specialized units attached to brigades and battalions located in areas where guerrillas of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas

Revolucionarias de Colombia), the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), and other organizations were active. The intelligence units and the operatives who commanded them were the linchpins in the military's counterinsurgency campaign, the interface between state security forces and their vicious paramilitary allies—the so-called self-defense forces. Intelligence agents cultivated relations with paramilitary groups and coordinated their activities. Sometimes they worked temporarily with the paramilitaries, but at other times they paid them to murder selected individuals. Information about the guerrillas and their unarmed sympathizers flowed freely between the army and the paramilitaries, many of whom were themselves former military officers.

The human rights violations attributed to Urbina took place between 1977, when he was a captain in the Second Brigade's intelligence unit, and 1989, when he was a colonel in the DAS. They began with the disappearance of Omaira Montoya Henao and Mauricio Trujillo in the coastal city of Barranquilla. The pair was snatched off a street and then brutally tortured; Omaira Montoya was never seen again. Evidence linked Urbina to the crime, but he was not investigated.

In 1986, Lieutenant Colonel Urbina, recently returned from the School of the Americas, managed a regional intelligence network from the headquarters of the Fifth Brigade, located in the highly conflict-ridden Middle Magdalena region of central Colombia. There was nothing high-tech about his operation. "I'm an old soldier," he explained, "so for me you can never replace human intelligence [with technology]." But putting an intelligence network together was not easy. "You recruit people. It is more a question of common sense than training. To teach a person to become a good director of a network is very difficult. You invent things and you get results . . . it takes a long time to really learn how to do the work." During the two years that Urbina spent with this unit, William Camacho Barajas and Orlando García González were detained by an army patrol in the town of San Gil. They were registered under false names, taken to the Fifth Brigade's intelligence unit, and never seen again. Ten months later, Mario Alexander Plazas disappeared; his burned cadaver was discovered in the town of Piedecuesta. A Fifth Brigade intelligence agent confessed to the murder, stating that Urbina ordered the disappearance, torture, and execution of the young man. Urbina, however, was neither questioned nor linked officially to the crime. Shortly thereafter, paramilitaries and army intelligence agents dressed in civilian clothing murdered the mayor

of Sabana de Torres, Alvaro Garcés Parra. Urbina was again fingered by an insider as the intellectual author of the crime, but no official questions were asked. The army rewarded Urbina for his service in the Fifth Brigade by promoting him to full colonel.

By 1989, Urbina had earned a ticket to Bogotá and a job in the DAS, where he allegedly coordinated a nationwide paramilitary network that disappeared and murdered individuals identified as guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers. During his tenure as an army spy chief, he maintained close ties with a former U.S. colleague from the School of the Americas who worked in the embassy. “The Americans,” he said, “gave me cars. They equipped units, and they set up communications systems for me. We achieved good results.” Indeed, the first Bush administration was assisting the army’s counterinsurgency campaign with rising levels of military and intelligence aid. Although this support was earmarked officially for an escalating war on drugs, U.S. officials knew that the Colombian military would cooperate in the drug war only if the aid allowed them to pursue the guerrillas, their main adversary.⁴ So when Urbina targeted the insurgents and their civilian sympathizers, the protests of these U.S. policy-makers were muted, if audible at all. “The army is the primary entity charged with fighting subversion,” explained Urbina, “and we began to hit the subversives using the U.S. aid to fight the drug traffic.” During this period, Amparo Tordecilla disappeared, kidnapped by a group of men who approached her in a taxi. Her cadaver and those of others were later discovered in a clandestine cemetery on the outskirts of the city. One of the individuals who participated in the abduction claimed that the taxi belonged to the army and that it was under Urbina’s control.

None of this affected Urbina’s career in a negative way. In 1991, the government sent him to Venezuela as its military attaché. It had opened negotiations with the FARC in Caracas, and the subject of amnesty for the insurgents was on the table. Urbina, like other military hard-liners, opposed any kind of amnesty that “sold out the country.” He manipulated the government negotiators with intelligence that he fed them about the guerrillas and eventually took credit for the collapse of the talks. “They broke off the negotiations and that is what I wanted,” he explained. “It was a good action.” When he returned to Colombia, the army wasted little time in promoting him to brigadier general. Of the sixty-two men who graduated with him from the military academy, Urbina was one of only five to make general.

Urbina mentioned the Tordecilla case during our interview, making vague references to the matter but then brushing it aside with comments like “I’ll tell you about it later.” He felt more comfortable blaming human rights organizations for the troubles in which he and other military officials found themselves. According to the general, human rights groups worked in league with the guerrillas, drug traffickers, and common delinquents to attack the integrity of the armed forces. “If a commandant does the right thing in his operations and hits the subversives hard, it’s easy to denounce him and to say that he was the one who disappeared such-and-such a person.” He then mused about the fate of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. “Just take the Pinochet case,” he said. “Pinochet is paying the consequences of something that he probably wasn’t even aware of. The consequences are terrible. Here in Colombia we are heading in the same direction . . . I go to get my ticket to travel to the United States and they have me figured as a delinquent . . . a bandit.”

Later in our conversation he referred obliquely to a book published by a group of human rights organizations that delineated a series of allegations against members of the Colombian armed forces.⁵ “Because of this book, a lot of people lost their [U.S.] visas,” he complained.

“Do you appear in the book?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, looking at the table. “But what I am telling you is that they [guerrillas and human rights organizations] are re-persecuting the people who are hitting them. Yes, I am in the book, but I haven’t even been investigated for what they say because [the charges] are lies. And they involve my brothers who had nothing to do with what happened.”

I pressed him to explain his version of the events in the Tordecilla case, but he offered few specifics. “When I was the director of army intelligence,” he began, “they say that a woman who was the lover of a guerrilla commander was disappeared. . . . There were many details. People were saying many things, that there had been an army car. . . . They said that the car that they had seen was one of mine, that the car belonged to the army and was under my orders. I can’t always know where all of the army’s intelligence cars are. . . . They investigated me but I got out from under the problem in 1999. Now I don’t have anything to do with it.”

Nowadays nobody sees much of Urbina. He retired from the armed forces in 1995 and, like many of his army colleagues, joined the burgeoning private security business. He sold his services for five years to a private,

U.S.-owned transportation company that operated in Colombia, protecting outgoing airplane cargoes from infiltration by drugs. He was well paid for his efforts. "I bought a good apartment," he told me. He also purchased a new car and was secure enough financially to leave this employment and go into business for himself. With four other retired army officers, Urbina founded his own security firm that specialized in protecting cargoes trucked overland by private entrepreneurs.

He resides in an upscale part of northern Bogotá, an area that has been relatively untouched by the rising violence in Colombia. His wife is worried about his safety and would like to leave Colombia, but Urbina maintains that a retired officer belongs in his country, although he acknowledges that many people would like to kill him. The general maintains a low profile: he does not talk to the press, he avoids public events, the beard and glasses are part of a new look cultivated since he left the armed forces, and when he travels to other parts of Colombia, he uses a false name. Urbina enjoys golf and plays a couple of times a week at a club frequented by other army officers. He also visits the United States from time to time. How, I ask, does he enter the United States without a visa. "I've had a visa for a long time," he says, "and besides, they have certainly realized that [none of the charges] are true. I don't know. I go to the United States with no problem."

Urbina's career embodies the issues of military training, U.S. complicity, human rights, and impunity that shaped the bloody history of the cold war in Colombia and much of Latin America. These issues and their complicated legacy are at the core of this book. Urbina expresses no regrets about the past, despite the numerous, serious allegations made against him by human rights organizations that have presented what they consider to be evidence of his culpability. Impunity is widespread in Colombia, as it is elsewhere in the Americas, and none of the charges against Urbina have stuck. The general is unrepentant. Knocking on the table, he exclaims, "I have done nothing wrong, nothing more than serve my country."

INTRODUCTION



The Military, Political Violence, and Impunity

I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its people.—Secretary of State Henry Kissinger commenting on the election of Salvador Allende as president of Chile in 1970.

Chile's coup d'état was close to perfect.—Lieutenant Colonel Patrick J. Ryan, U.S. Military Group Commander, Santiago, Chile, October 1, 1973

Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature . . . I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.—President George W. Bush, September 11, 2001

Almost three decades before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon killed over three thousand people, another act of unspeakable horror took place in the South American country of Chile on September 11, 1973. A savage military coup d'état backed by the United States overthrew democratically elected president Salvador Allende and unleashed a wave of state-sponsored terror that left thousands of Chileans dead. The events in the United States and Chile, so different in many ways, shared two important features: the deaths of thousands of civilians and the involvement of the United States in training the terrorists. Osama bin Laden joined the mujahideen guerrillas who were organized, trained, and equipped by the United States to topple a pro-Soviet regime that controlled Afghanistan in the 1980s, even though U.S. strategists recog-

nized that many of the Islamic fundamentalists of the mujahideen opposed democracy, women's rights, and religious pluralism.

General Pinochet and his compatriots in the Chilean armed forces were also aided and abetted by the United States despite their use of terror at home and abroad. Almost all of the Chilean officers who overthrew Allende had trained at a U.S. military service school prior to the coup; most had attended the U.S. Army's prestigious School of the Americas, a training institution where Latin American soldiers learn counterinsurgency warfare. The most notorious acts of international terrorism committed by the Pinochet regime included the 1974 car bomb assassination of General Carlos Pratts and his wife in Buenos Aires; the 1974 attempted murder of Bernardo Leighton, the founder of the Chilean Christian Democratic Party, in Rome; and the 1976 car bomb execution of Orlando Letelier, Allende's former ambassador to the United States, and his U.S. aide, Ronnie Moffat, in Washington, D.C. The assassinations were orchestrated by the Chilean secret police and connected to Operation Condor, a network of South American intelligence agencies that collaborated in hunting down and assassinating political dissidents who opposed the dictatorships in their respective countries. The fact that the Letelier murder was carried out in the heart of Washington, D.C., testifies to the confidence with which Pinochet's secret police operated in the United States and suggests that the CIA was probably aware of its activities.¹

The dual tragedies of September 11 force us to recognize that the United States government has assisted in the creation of international terrorist networks and has rarely let a commitment to democracy stand in the way of its global ambitions. But until the attack of September 11, 2001, American citizens seldom experienced the horror, the anguish, the profound loss, and the lingering sense of vulnerability that the survivors of terrorism in other parts of the world know too well. From Chile to East Timor, Congo, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, and many other cold war battlegrounds, ordinary people who desired land reform, better wages, improved health care, education, and the basic right of self-determination were labeled communists by U.S.-backed regimes and murdered, tortured, and disappeared by shadowy paramilitary death squads and state security forces trained by the United States. The perpetrators were almost never held accountable, and officials acknowledged the dead and the abused very slowly, if at all. The Third World victims of cold war atrocities usually did not receive public commemorations, such as those so fittingly

published by the *New York Times* for each individual killed in the World Trade Center, nor were memorials constructed in their honor.

Forgetting the proxy wars and covert operations carried out by the United States and the Third World security forces that do its bidding obscures the extent to which modern America emerged as the result of an imperial project that brutalized and oppressed peoples around the world. To understand these international adventures, a broad conceptualization of imperialism is useful, one that begins with the intrusion of U.S. economic interests into other countries and extends to the multiple and varied practices of political, military, and cultural domination.² The empire which the United States now possesses is notable for the constellation of military bases that dot the globe; the defense budget that, even before September 11, 2001, totaled billions of dollars; the stockpile of nuclear weapons capable of destroying humankind; the ongoing alliances with repressive regimes that range from the Saudi royal family to the unrepentant military of Guatemala that rules behind a facade of civilian government,³ and the history of military intervention that continues unabated, as the invasion and occupation of Iraq so amply demonstrates.

Military bases, weapons, and strategic alliances with local security forces constitute the cutting edge of the U.S. empire in which the American state rules less through the control of territory than through the penetration and manipulation of subordinate states that retain considerable political independence.⁴ As Panitch and Gindin (2003, 30) note, “the need to try to refashion all of the states of the world so they become at least minimally adequate for the administration of global [capitalist] order . . . is now the central problem of the American state.” This is an enormously complex and difficult task that requires dense networks of economic, cultural, social, and military control; indeed, the frequent inability of the American state to turn subordinate states into effective instruments of U.S.-led global capitalism generates policies aimed at removing the threats posed by so-called rogue states.⁵

U.S. imperialism, however, extends well beyond military interventions, foreign policy debates, and the intrusive economic policies of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.⁶ The historian William Appleman Williams describes the U.S. empire as “a way of life” (1980). Understood in this way, imperialism unfolds at the local level through a variety of power-laden relationships between unequal social actors. The security forces—militaries, paramili-

taries, militarized police forces—constitute one of the most basic forms of imperial intrusion and control, as they enforce the systems of order required by dominant groups to manage different kinds of people. The relationship of Third World security forces to the United States, to each other, and to various noncombatant civilians takes different forms under changing historical conditions.

Dealing with the dark, seamy side of U.S. involvement in global affairs has never been easy for the citizens of the United States because of widespread amnesia about twentieth-century U.S. empire building. A broad cross-section of Americans like to think of their country as a land of freedom, a beacon to the oppressed, an exemplary democracy, and most recently, a righteous crusader against global terrorism. This nationalist vision has deep roots in notions of American exceptionalism and distinctiveness, but U.S. citizens and policymakers cling to it at their own peril. Summarizing an ongoing debate between U.S. diplomatic historians and American studies scholars, an editor of a recent collection of historical essays suggests that

to argue in the manner of George Kennan and subsequent generations of “realists” (and latter-day “post-revisionists”) that if the United States *briefly* had an empire in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, it promptly gave it away; that, therefore, imperialism has always been inconsequential to U.S. history; that, unlike the great powers of Europe, the historical experience of the United States has been characterized by “discovery” not “imperium,” “global power” not “imperialism,” “unipolarity” not “hegemony” is to perpetuate false notions of “American exceptionalism” and to engage psychologically in denial and projection. Such arguments also ignore structures, practices and discourses of domination and possession that run throughout U.S. history (Joseph 1998, 5–6).

The mystification of U.S. involvement in global affairs is reflected, at least in part, in the naive headlines that asked “Why Do They Hate Us?” on the front pages of U.S. newspapers and magazines in the aftermath of September 11. This ingenuous question suggests that past U.S. aggression never existed, or if it did, it was unintentional. The question also points to the inability of many Americans to move beyond the hopelessly provincial understandings that inform their views of the world’s peoples.

Since the nineteenth century, however, the United States has willfully

embarked on a career as an imperial power, and it has assembled the tools of repression that this required. Many U.S. citizens have cheered its progress along the way or lived behind a wall of self-absorbed denial and ignorance about the consequences of U.S. foreign policy. As Catherine Lutz has so eloquently written, “we have not evaluated the costs of being a country ever ready for battle. The international costs are even more invisible as Americans have looked away from the face of empire and been taught to think of war with a distancing focus on its ostensible purpose—‘freedom assured’ or ‘aggressors deterred’—rather than the melted, exploded, raped and lacerated bodies and destroyed social worlds at its center” (2001, 2). This is *not* to claim therefore that the United States deserved what happened on September 11, 2001, or that the perpetrators should remain unaccountable. Such a conclusion mistakes explanation for justification and is itself a product of the historical amnesia at the heart of American nationalism. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the terror attacks, those who sought explanations in the history of U.S. global involvement were arrogantly dismissed for allegedly suggesting that the country somehow got what it deserved. “Nobody deserves terror,” writes Argentine-born Ariel Dorfman, but “what we deserve, all of us, is some measure of justice” (2002, 22).

Justice, however, requires that we distinguish between the civilians who died on September 11 in the World Trade Towers, the Pentagon, and the hijacked airliners, and the high-ranking military officials of the Pentagon who have organized and supported acts of terrorism against innocent people elsewhere. We must also be mindful of the differences between the civilian domains represented by the World Trade Towers and the hijacked passenger airliners on the one hand and the Pentagon, which represents the center of the United States global military apparatus, on the other hand. The perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, attacks must certainly be apprehended and held accountable, but the perpetrators of terrorism within the U.S. military establishment, along with the political leaders who approved their actions over the last half of the twentieth century, are also responsible for their actions and should account for them, if we are to take a consistent stand against organized violence and the deaths of unarmed men, women, and children everywhere.

Investigating and understanding the military’s relationships to the peoples around the world long treated as inferior allows us to appreciate how U.S. interventions repressed, terrorized, and humiliated others. It is to

comprehend that our grief and sorrow are not unique and that American dead are not the only ones who count. To grasp the complexity of these relationships, we must explore the imperial alliances, social entanglements, networks of power, cultural understandings, and pervasive impunity that have upheld U.S. global hegemony.

This book examines how the United States constructs a repressive military apparatus, in a region long considered by many to be its “backyard,” through the lens of the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas (soA). The School of the Americas is a U.S. Army center for Latin American militaries that, since its establishment in the Panama Canal Zone in 1946, has trained over sixty thousand soldiers in combat-related skills and counterinsurgency doctrine. It has been at the center of an intense public controversy over the last decade, because of the participation of some of its alumni in human rights atrocities. Some of the most notorious graduates include Argentine General Roberto Viola, who was convicted of murder, kidnapping, and torture during Argentina’s “dirty war” (1976–1983); former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega; Salvadoran Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, who commanded the brutal Atlacatl Battalion that massacred nearly one thousand civilians in El Mozote; Guatemalan Colonel Julio Alpírez, who tortured and murdered guerrillas and a U.S. citizen while on the CIA’s payroll; and Honduran General Luis Alonso Discua, who commanded an army death squad known as Battalion 3-16.

Critics of the School assert that Latin American soldiers learn the repressive tactics of counterinsurgency warfare, which pits soldiers less against guerrilla insurgents and drug traffickers than against poor peasants and civilians (Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001), but U.S. Army officials identify alumni charged with human rights violations as “a few bad apples” who do not reflect the School’s overall success in building ties to Latin American militaries. Because of the controversy, the soA has gained considerable notoriety. It has been forced to open its doors to greater public scrutiny, and the Defense Department changed its name to the Western Hemisphere Institute of Security Cooperation in 2001.

Starting from the School of the Americas, the book traces the relationships of empire building through the experiences of three groups of people. First, it considers how military personnel from the United States and Latin America engage each other at the School through the quotidian experiences of military training and daily life, and how these highly unequal encounters mold various kinds of relationships, understandings,

opportunities, and patterns of collusion that extend across the Americas and anchor a vision of empire in actual experience. It demonstrates how the United States bought the collusion of Latin American security forces in the aftermath of World War II and how, over the course of the twentieth century, it transformed these entities into extensions of its own power in Latin America and internationalized state-sponsored violence in the Americas.

The internationalization of the repressive power of Latin American states reverberated throughout the Americas. State agents became more efficient in carrying out acts of violence, which exacted a heavy toll on the human rights of many Latin Americans. At the same time, the control and influence that the U.S. military exercised over national security forces enhanced the ability of the United States to manipulate independent governments as it pursued key political, economic, and security interests in the hemisphere.⁷ Finally, the training and arming of a castelike group of professional soldiers aggravated processes of social and economic differentiation in many Latin American countries.

From the School of the Americas, the focus then shifts to the coca-producing regions of Colombia and Bolivia, where the expansion of the illegal cocaine traffic, the presence of armed guerrillas, and the organization of militant peasant coca-grower unions have led to an intensification of state-sponsored violence. The discussion teases out some of the connections between local-level security forces, the School of the Americas, and other U.S. military training initiatives. It also scrutinizes the consequences of militarization for peasant families and the ways that impunity for members of the security forces and civilian officials shapes the relationship between state-sponsored violence and deepening social fragmentation. The analysis then returns to the United States, where a vibrant social movement dedicated to closing the soA has focused attention on the School's training practices and connected them to human rights violations committed by School alumni. The discussion examines the challenges posed by the movement and explores the shifting logics of power within the U.S. military as the Defense Department struggles to reconstitute the School, refine its public relations message, and revamp its mission—all in an effort to shore up the legitimacy of a disgraced military training institution and by extension, past and present U.S. policies in Latin America.

How, this book asks, does the United States train Latin American

“professional” soldiers who define their agendas in distinctive ways and on whom the United States depends for cooperation but does not entirely trust? How does this training, immersion in the “American way of life,” and access to a transnational world of power and privilege shape the Latin Americans’ ties to U.S. military personnel, their social and career mobility at home, and their geopolitical understandings? What lessons do soldiers—U.S. and Latin American—draw about the dirty wars that raged across Latin America for the last half of the twentieth century, and to what extent are they now willing to accept, excuse, or condemn the exercise of violence and the violation of human rights? What is the relationship between the “order” produced by security forces in Latin America and the disorder wrought on peasant families, and how does this shape the demand for military training? Finally, how has the U.S. government dealt with its own citizens who oppose the use of their tax dollars for military training and demand that the soa be shut down? Addressing these questions allows us to move beyond simplistic distinctions between “us” and “them” and to explore the tensions and contradictions that have emerged with the expansion of U.S. military power in the Americas.

Even though the soa has captured the public spotlight, it is only a small part of a vast network of U.S.-sponsored training programs worldwide. The School graduates between six hundred and eight hundred police and military officers annually, and it trains several hundred more via mobile training teams dispatched to Latin America; in contrast, the United States military instructs some one hundred thousand allied, foreign soldiers in the United States and abroad every year. Approximately forty-eight thousand soldiers and law enforcement officials from around the world trained in the United States in 2000, and between 1998 and 2000, ten thousand to fifteen thousand Latin Americans received instruction from U.S. military personnel in the United States and in their home countries (Lumpee 2002).

In the United States, foreign soldiers and U.S. troops train together in at least one hundred fifty disclosed training centers and military schools, where instruction is geared primarily to the needs of U.S. forces.⁸ The international students represent all branches of the armed forces, but most come from the armies of their respective countries. Schools with large numbers of foreign trainees include the U.S. Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the U.S. Army JFK Special

Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (Lumpee 2002). Several Spanish-language schools, however, operate specifically for Latin American officers. In addition to the School of the Americas, they include the Inter-American Defense College in Washington, D.C., the Inter-American Air Force Academy at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, and the Navy Small-Craft Instruction and Technical Training School, which operates in Mississippi and North Carolina. Together, they reflect the strategic significance of Latin America for the United States.

The U.S. military and law enforcement agencies train foreign security forces abroad in a myriad of venues. Small Special Forces Mobil Training Teams (MTTs) teach specialized units from numerous countries. They instruct foreign militaries on the techniques for waging small-scale strikes, counterterrorism activities, psychological operations, foreign internal defense (i.e., organizing, training, and advising military and paramilitary forces), “unconventional” warfare (i.e., support of military and paramilitary operations against a standing government), and “such other activities as may be specified by the President or the Department of Defense” (LAWG 1999); moreover, joint training exercises that involve both the Special Forces and the U.S. military’s regular forces with their foreign counterparts also take place frequently. In addition, intelligence agencies instruct an undisclosed number of military and paramilitary troops around the world, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Customs Service, and the Drug Enforcement Agency have their own training programs for overseas security. Very little is known publicly about these activities. Finally, a number of private companies, such as the Washington, D.C.–based Dyncorp and Military Professionals International, contract with the U.S. government to carry out military training activities and to maintain high-tech weaponry for Third World clients. They are also directly hired by foreign governments, but their practices are subject to little congressional oversight or public accountability (Amnesty International 2002, iv).

Military training is fueled by an enormous arms industry that requires the availability of training for the continued development, use, and maintenance of weapons. Forty-six of the one hundred largest arms producers in the world are United States companies, and together they sold ninety-six billion dollars worth of weaponry in 2000 (SIPRI 2000). Training is also shaped by the shifting geopolitical field of force in which the United States defines its national interests and security concerns. During the cold war, it

was geared to the defeat of the “communist” enemy in the Third World through counterinsurgency programs that combined economic assistance with psychological operations and security measures. Counterinsurgency doctrine was initially geared to defeating revolutionary movements that challenged U.S. hegemony, but during the Reagan administration, a new, more aggressive strategy of intervention called “low-intensity conflict” (LIC) emerged that went beyond targeting insurgencies. The new strategy was to undermine governments that already existed and were perceived to be hostile to the United States. Both counterinsurgency and LIC doctrines advocated similar kinds of economic, psychological, and paramilitary coercion and aimed to defeat any threat to U.S. interests (Klare and Kornbluh 1988).

Fighting “communists”—an enormously elastic category that could accommodate almost any critic of the status quo—became obsolete in the post-cold war era after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the drug war in the 1990s. The U.S. military’s Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) welcomed the drug war because it enabled SOUTHCOM to expand relations with allied militaries throughout the hemisphere. Counternarcotics training provided the opportunity to strengthen ties to local security forces, and low-intensity warfare strategies employed in Central America were easily adapted to fighting a war on drugs (Youngers 2003). Training programs shifted to so-called operations other than war, such as counternarcotics and counterterrorism activities, although the basic techniques of warfare at the local level remained substantially the same. In the Andean region, the term “narcoguerrilla,” which replaced “communist” for a few years, was overtaken by the more ominous-sounding “terrorist.” The drug war and the subsequent “war on terrorism” offered convenient rationales for SOUTHCOM to maintain troop and funding levels as other areas of the world, especially the Middle East, became more important to the Pentagon. Following the attack on the World Trade Center, President Bush offered military training to any nation willing to join the United States in a global crusade against terrorism, and the administration shifted the definition of the conflict in Colombia from a drug war to a war on terror in order to justify its involvement in counterinsurgency operations.

A focus on the School of the Americas opens a small window onto the ways that the United States trains diverse foreign soldiers and secures their cooperation. It allows us to explore the creation of coercive, highly unequal relationships between members of the armies of the Americas and

to consider how, under the tutelage of the United States, beliefs about professionalism, human rights, just wars, and subversion are crafted. This is important because, according to numerous truth commission reports from the 1980s and 1990s, state security forces were responsible for the vast majority of massacres, murders, disappearances, and extrajudicial executions that characterized the twentieth-century Latin American “dirty wars,” when many countries suffered under the boot of military dictatorships (REMHI 1999; ANCD 1986; CNPDH 1994; Comisión de la Verdad 1993), and that continue to plague Andean countries like Colombia. Although limited democracy has replaced military rule, abusive, U.S.-trained armies and counternarcotics police forces are still responsible for most of the human rights violations in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, where the United States is involved in a conflict that is at times a drug war, at times a counterinsurgency war, and at times a war on “terror.” Militaries retain an enormous amount of political and economic power, and civilian governments have only rarely held military perpetrators accountable for human rights crimes, past and present. When they do, it is usually only after years of struggle by human rights organizations and the relatives of the victims.

In Argentina, for instance, members of the security forces who murdered, tortured, and disappeared thousands of people in a dirty war (1976–1983) benefited from the Obediencia Debida and Punto Final Laws that allowed low-ranking personnel to claim that they were “following orders” and set limitations on the duration of human rights trials. President Carlos Menem (1989–99) then instituted sweeping pardons that exonerated high-ranking commanders convicted of orchestrating the dirty war (Feitlowitz 1998; Verbitsky 1996). Some of these commanders were later retried and convicted for kidnapping the babies born in captivity to female prisoners who were subsequently executed. In Guatemala, most officers escaped prosecution, and by the mid-1990s none had been convicted for ordering the murders and massacres that left two hundred thousand Guatemalans dead during a thirty-five-year civil war (e.g., Schirmer 1998; Perera 1993; Carmack 1988; Menchú 1984, and Levenson-Estrada 1994). In 2002, however, a Guatemalan court convicted Colonel Juan Valencia Osorio for ordering the murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack in 1990. It sentenced him to thirty years in prison, but the glimmer of hope that this ruling offered to human rights defenders was extinguished when the conviction was overturned on appeal. Mack was the founder of a research institute called AVANCSO, which published a report in 1990 that

linked the internal displacement of thousands of Guatemalans to the army's counterinsurgency campaign. In Colombia, midlevel officers who tolerated, planned, and took part in paramilitary violence in the 1980s received promotions and currently hold the highest positions in the armed forces (HRW 1996), which continues to wage a brutal civil war in which thousands of innocent civilians are killed and displaced from their homes every year.

In El Salvador, the high-ranking perpetrators of large-scale massacres, such as the one that took place at El Mozote, were not held accountable, and when investigations of human rights abuses took place, the government and the U.S. embassy restricted them to low-ranking soldiers (Binford 1996).⁹ The stirrings of justice for some victims only began in 2002, when a U.S. court in Florida ordered two retired Salvadoran generals—José Guillermo García and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova—living in the United States to pay fifty-five million dollars to three Salvadoran citizens tortured in El Salvador some twenty years ago, when the Reagan-Bush administration supported the Salvadoran armed forces. Their involvement with El Salvador's dirty war, however, runs much deeper. While he was minister of defense, for example, soA graduate García failed to investigate the 1980 deaths of four U.S. churchwomen and the 1981 El Mozote massacre. Vides Casanova, who headed the national guard at the time, allegedly ordered the murder of the nuns. Neither man was ever held accountable for these crimes, and Vides Casanova was invited to the School of the Americas as a guest speaker in 1985.

Yet despite ample evidence of the involvement of security forces in human rights violations and a few victories for human rights activists, widespread impunity remains the norm throughout Latin America. Amnesty laws passed in the waning days of war and military rule, or enacted by unsteady civilian governments, continue to shield the guilty, and unreformed militaries protect their own behind a wall of secrecy, threats, and lies, claiming that national "reconciliation" depends upon burying the past. Human rights organizations and activists in the judiciary, however, have not given up their struggles to hold perpetrators accountable. Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón, for example, has played a leading role in bringing Latin American military officials, such as Augusto Pinochet, to justice. In addition, Garzón has requested that British authorities question former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who visited London in April 2002, about his knowledge of the international terrorist network known as