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Empirical Findings

by **PATRICK TIMMONS**

Empire's Workshop, the superb new book by historian Greg Grandin, begins with a reference to one of the 20th century's master storytellers. "The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once remarked that the lack of camels in the Koran proves its Middle Eastern provenance: only a native author, he explained, could have so taken the animal for granted as not to mention it." Perhaps, suggests Grandin, "a similar familiarity explains the absence of Latin America in recent discussions about the United States and its empire."

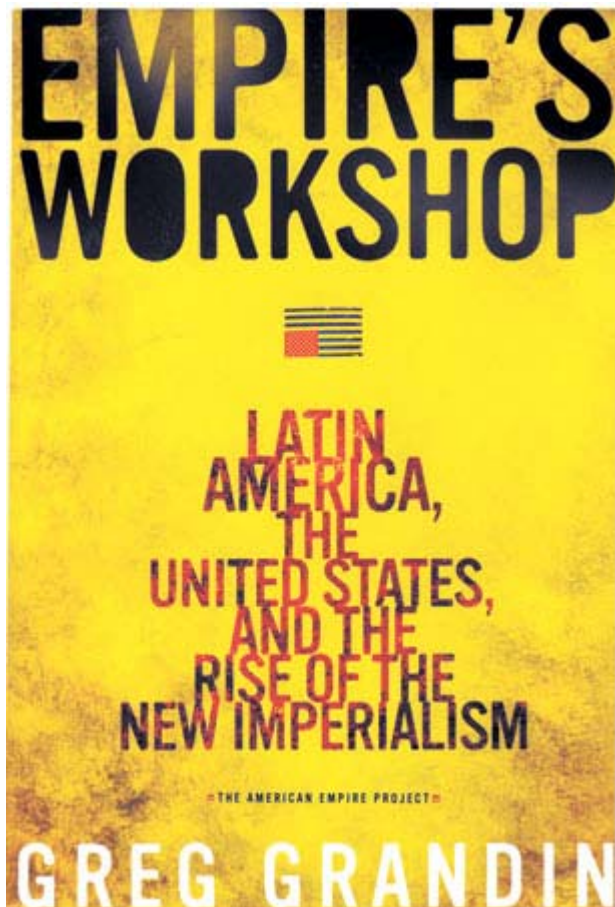
A professor of history at New York University, Grandin's earlier book, The Last Colonial Massacre, examined the legacy of U.S. intervention in Latin America during the Cold War. The net result, he argues, was the elimination of homegrown versions of social democracy.

Before finishing his doctorate, Grandin worked for a year with the United Nations Truth Commission investigating political violence in Guatemala. "Working as something of a house historian to an institution largely staffed by lawyers made me appreciate the value of historical analysis," he later wrote. "[L]awyers get nervous with any attempt to move beyond the immediate mechanics of an act to get at the larger 'why.'" For those trying to get at the larger "why" of U.S. involvement in Iraq, Grandin's latest book is indispensable.

The following interview is excerpted from a series of e-mail exchanges with the Observer.

Texas Observer: *Latin America and the Middle East would seem to have very little in common. In Empire's Workshop you make the case that we can only understand the War on Terror if we examine the history of U.S. engagement with Latin America during the 20th century. Why?*

Greg Grandin: Because it was in Latin America where the modern New Right—the coalition of religious fundamentalists, neoconservative militarists and nationalists, and free-marketeers that then stood behind Reagan and today behind Bush—first moved U.S. diplomacy away from a policy of “containment” to “rollback,” paving the way for what neocons today like to call a “global democratic revolution.” All of the debates we are hearing today about the ability of the executive branch to wage an unaccountable war, along with all of Bush’s abuses of power—the wiretaps, manipulation of the media, torture in the name of freedom, the creation of an interagency war party designed to undercut the foreign policy establishment—can be traced back to Ronald Reagan’s Central American policy, which in retrospect has to be understood as the New Right’s first attempt to restore the imperial presidency.



TO: A watershed event was the U.S.-supported coup that toppled the democratically elected government of

Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954.

GG: The CIA's 1954 coup was significant in a number of ways. First, it was the agency's first serious Latin American Cold War covert operation. It was much more ambitious than anything it had done in, say, Iran the year before, drawing more extensively on psychological and disinformation tactics to destabilize the government of democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz. Second, it signaled that the United States had definitively sacrificed democracy at the altar of Cold War security concerns. Actually, as early as 1948 the State Department had indicated that its tolerance for political openness in Latin America was contingent on political stability, but this coup marked a point of no return. It opened the door to Washington's wholesale support of military dictators and, eventually, death squads. In Latin America, the coup radicalized a generation of reformers who would no longer point to the United States as a democratic model to follow, but an obstacle to democracy. A perfect example of this would be Che Guevara, who was in Guatemala at the time of the coup working as a young, socially conscious medical doctor attending to the poor. He was forced to flee into Mexico, where he met Fidel Castro. Che would eventually adopt as one of his mottos "Cuba will not be Guatemala" to explain the militancy of the Cuban Revolution.

TO: *You suggest that Reagan's policy toward Central America, especially Nicaragua, facilitated the emergence of the New Right around an ideology of what you call "punitive idealism." Would you explain what this concept means, and how it became a central part of U.S. policy in Latin America?*

GG: In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, neoconservatives boldly announced a revolution in American diplomacy. The old divisions between realism and idealism, we were told, no longer held. Bush himself put it succinctly in his second inaugural address when he proclaimed that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one." Some neocons called this "hard Wilsonianism," claiming that the best way to ensure America's security is to spread democracy throughout the world. There was much discussion about how the Republican Party came to embrace such a vision of security, for that kind of soaring rhetoric had previously been the property of the Democrats, from Wilson to Kennedy. Some make mention of Ronald

Reagan's championing of the human rights of Soviet and Eastern European dissidents, while others focused on the rise of the neoconservatives and their recasting of the Cold War as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, exemplified by Paul Wolfowitz's celebrated role in convincing Reagan to force Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines to step down and make way for free elections, a remarkable about-face for an administration that had long embraced the dictator. But they all ignore Reagan's Central American policy, perhaps because of the high body count. After all, hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans killed as a result of U.S. policy left a blot—as even some of his defenders admitted—on Reagan's embrace of the language of human rights.

But it was exactly in such carnage that the neoconservative ideology was born. The New Right came to power in the 1980s as a response to the crisis of the 1970s. That crisis had three essential dimensions. Militarily, the U.S. had been kicked out of Southeast Asia and discredited by a poorly armed peasant insurgency. Politically, Watergate had cracked open the establishment, exposing a government that ruled not by consent and transparency, but by manipulation, surveillance, and coercion. And economically, competition from the developing world and Europe, along with the costs of Vietnam, eroded America's privileged position in the global economy since the end of World War II. The Reagan Revolution responded to this crisis by pledging to pacify the Third World, and Central America, then in the midst of a revolutionary upheaval, was the logical place to start. But this crisis also had a fourth dimension, a moral one. To re-establish American power in the world, that power had to be justified in ethical terms. It was in Central America where the Republican Party first fully embraced human rights, nation-building, and democratization as diplomatic objectives, even as it was patronizing ruthless thugs. It was not enough to simply finance and train rapists, murderers, and torturers. They had to be hailed, said Reagan, as the "moral equivalents of our founding fathers." The "Salvador Option," in other words, is less a specific reference to a reliance on paramilitary killers to keep order than the essence of the Bush Doctrine. Call it death-squad nation-building.

TO: Empire's Workshop distinguishes itself from other recent works on the new American empire because it

explains how Washington politicians use engagements in foreign countries to shape domestic political culture. In other words, we can't just point at politicians or multinational corporations to explain the new American empire. Would you argue that the American public is part of this process? If so, would you identify the type of domestic coalition the New Right managed to bring together as they asserted Washington's power over Central America in the 1980s?

GG: Yes, over the last year or so there have been a number of books that have sought to take the measure of this or that group within the Bush coalition to explain how we wound up believing we could telegraph democracy to Iraq through the barrel of a gun. There was Francis Fukuyama on the neocons, for instance, along with Kevin Phillips on the theocons. Other scholars have looked at nationalists and militarists. *Empire's Workshop* can be read as a missing link connecting these works, examining how the coalition that gave rise to the Bush administration's pre-emptive warfare doctrine was itself forged in the crucible of war. Now most accounts of the rise of the New Right focus on its domestic dimensions, linking it to a backlash against the crisis of authority and social liberalization of the 1960s, situating it within economic and demographic shifts such as post-1973 industrialization and the transfer of the nation's economic and political center of gravity from the Northeast to the Southwest and West. But few studies have explicitly understood the New Right not only to be an internationalist movement, but that its energy and success can be found in that internationalism. The Reagan Revolution could only sustain itself by continually marshaling its base in the name of an expansive foreign policy, pulling into its gravitational field a diverse constellation of nationalists, militarists, religionists, idealists, and economic elites.

TO: *Can you say more about the religious dimension of this revolution?*

GG: There's been much discussion about how evangelicals and secular neocons come together over Israel. Likewise, during the 2004 presidential campaign, many seemed to believe that if you scratch a conservative evangelical, if you could neutralize "cultural" issues like abortion, a la Thomas Frank, you would find a New Deal populist.

But Christian evangelicals were deeply involved in the process of “remoralizing” not just American power but the free-market capitalist base of that power. Again, Central America is key. In order to bypass congressional and public opposition to its Central American policy, the White House mobilized its fundamentalist base, in effect outsourcing the hearts-and-minds component of low intensity warfare to religious conservatives. This mobilization, in turn, both increased evangelical involvement in foreign policy and helped fuse the religious and secular branches of the New Right.

Evangelicals shared with neocon militarists a sense that America had grown dangerously weak, and that only a rebirth of political will, or spiritual renewal, would save it. Their understanding of themselves as a persecuted people engaged in an end-time struggle between good and evil mapped easily onto the absolutism of anti-communist militarists. This happened in the case of the Central American Cold Warriors, many of whom, such as CIA director William Casey and Oliver North, were themselves members of ultraconservative Christian sects like Opus Dei or the Knights of Malta—the *Da Vinci Code* has nothing on what happened in Central America.

One aspect of the Central American wars largely overlooked is the importance of Liberation Theology, along with the Christian humanism of the domestic solidarity movement, in uniting the New Right. Well before radical Islam, Liberation Theology was the “political religion” that secular anti-communists, mainstream conservative theologians, and pulpit-thumping fundamentalists squared off against. So when Jeane Kirkpatrick remarked that the U.S. nuns who were raped, mutilated, and murdered by Salvadoran security forces in 1980 were “not just nuns, they were political activists,” she was being more than cruel. She was signaling her disapproval of a particular kind of peace Christianity, or Christian humanism.

TO: Has the so-called War on Terror facilitated the resurgence of that coalition?

GG: Yes. After Reagan left office and the Central American crises wound down, the alliance between evangelicals and secular idealists would begin to fracture. Prominent fundamentalists, such as Pat Robertson, distrusted George Herbert Walker Bush. And obviously they had little sympathy for the Clinton

administration. Yet many fundamentalists extended their increasingly confident engagement in world affairs well beyond Central America. In some ways, some of the most committed congressional “internationalists” are Christian conservatives like Virginian Representative Frank Wolf and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, who have consistently pushed Washington to deal with global humanitarian issues such as AIDS, sex trafficking, slavery, religious freedom, malaria, and genocide prevention. After 9/11, evangelical internationalists once again joined with a now fully empowered cohort of neocons to push George W. Bush—who if we remember promised a “humble” foreign policy during his first campaign—to embrace so-called “hard Wilsonianism” and to “remoralize” America’s role in the world.

In the run-up to Bush’s invasion of Iraq, the neoconservative punditry spent energy rehabilitating the concept “empire,” insisting that the world needed an imperial power to impose stability, and the only candidate available for the job was the United States. And while they evoked the Roman and British empires to make their case, they consistently ignored the one place where the U.S. had its most prolonged and intimate imperial experience: Latin America. So if you really wanted to know what the world would look like under a Pax Americana, you shouldn’t look at Roman Gaul or Australia, but violence-ridden, impoverished Central America. This of course is exactly what Dick Cheney, of all people, did in the 2004 vice-presidential debate when he held up El Salvador—not post-WWII Germany or Japan—as a model for what he hoped to achieve in Iraq. But this comparison struck too close to the bone, for shortly after Cheney made his remarks, the press started comparing the rise of death squads in Iraq to what took place in El Salvador. Too close a look at Latin America, it turns out, would raise some inconvenient questions, one of which should be: If Washington can’t bring stability and meaningful democracy to Latin America, a region that falls squarely within its own sphere of influence and whose population shares many of the values of the United States, then what are the chances that it will do so for the world?

***TO:** Why is raising awareness of the historical roots of the War on Terror your chosen strategy?*

GG: “History” is abused in all sorts of ways by those who want to reduce every issue or conflict to its barest

emotional simplicity in order to justify American power in the world. Hugo Chávez stands in a long line of Third World nationalists whom U.S. officials inevitably compare to Hitler. So I suppose it is a bit naïve, but hopefully raising awareness can draw the poison out of disingenuous metaphors.

Obviously the use of history to rally the nation to a cause is not in any way new, but as I try to show in my book, it did reach a new stage of public manipulation with the domestic propaganda—

psychological warfare, really—associated with Iran-Contra. Public relations firms contracted by the White House polled the American people for lists of emotive keywords, which were then transformed into talking points and distributed to government officials, scholars, media outlets, and NGOs. Yet it was Ronald Reagan, listed by the PR boys as an “asset” due to his communication skills, who best embodied the triumph of emotion over substance. With little respect for history or fact, Reagan played on popular fears and self-perceptions, presenting support for the Contras as keeping faith with America’s “revolutionary heritage.” After all, polling data revealed that the White House’s two most “exploitable themes” were the idea that the Contras were “Freedom Fighters” fighting for “freedom in the American tradition” and the idea that American “history requires support to freedom fighters.” Who could argue with that?

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