H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Judith Ewell. *Venezuela and the United States: From Monroe's Hemisphere to Petroleum's Empire.* Athens, Ga., and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996. x + 267 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-1783-0.

Reviewed by George W. Schuyler (University of Central Arkansas)
Published on H-LatAm (February, 1997)

Venezuela and the United States

In a 1989 article, Stephen G. Rabe outlined changes occurring in the historiography of diplomatic history and, more specifically, inter-American relations.[1] Rabe noted various studies of inter-American relations that incorporate social history to illuminate the impact of American influence and power abroad.[2] Rather than focusing only on the U.S. context of foreign policy, these studies explain foreign relations in terms of the cultural traditions, internal politics, and social milieu of other countries, and ask how such factors affect foreign reactions to U.S. policies. The authors blend analysis of state power, non-governmental groups, and the international movement of capital goods and technology–in short, a comprehensive analysis of official, private, commercial, and cultural relationships with other countries and peoples. This kind of approach produces analyses that examine not only the context of U.S. decision-making but also the consequences of the extension of U.S. power in Latin America, the mechanisms used to penetrate sovereign states, and the responses of local elites and communities.

Judith Ewell's fine study of the U.S.-Venezuela relationship is another example of scholarship that explores the inter-American dynamic from the perspectives of both the United States. and Latin America. A longtime student of Venezuelan affairs, Ewell has drawn upon her deep understanding of that oil-rich country to produce a well-documented study, using multiple sources ranging from diplomatic and consular reports to folklore and travel accounts. The author illuminates not only the changing nature of the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship over the past two centuries, but also deftly analyzes the multiple channels of U.S. influence in the increasingly complex twentieth century. She argues that geography, history, and petroleum have shaped Venezuela's national identity, and in some ways have made it the most "Americanized" of any Latin American country. At the same time, Ewell describes the strategies that Venezuela has used to cope with its powerful northern neighbor and discusses how Venezuela has helped shape the nature of the relationship. She makes clear that the interaction has not been simply one-way: "Venezuelans have influenced the tone and content of the relationship as well" (p. 10). Indeed, a strength of this study is Ewell's analysis of Venezuela's efforts to create an effective voice in its dealings with the United States and to protect its sovereignty.

The importance of the Venezuela-U.S. dynamic is that it serves as a microcosm of "transforming moments and issues" of inter-American relations–a lens through which to examine "U.S. goals and priorities regarding Latin America" (p. 6). In a larger context, this study examines the relationship between a hegemonic power and a weaker state and shows how the latter attempts to influence the former, striving to maintain a degree of autonomous action in both foreign and domestic policies. In the case of Venezuela, petroleum has become a major factor in its autonomy. During the 1970s, for example, high prices for petroleum enhanced Venezuela's capability for independent action; in the 1980s, falling prices and a heavy debt burden diminished it.

The book is organized chronologically with an introduction and eight chapters that take the reader from the origins of the Venezuela-U.S. relationship in the late eighteenth century to the petroleum and globally influenced relationship of the late twentieth century. The notes are extensive and informative and there is an excellent bibliographical essay. Ewell's study is part of a University of Georgia Press series entitled *The United States and the Americas* under the general editorship of Lester D. Langley. The series is "dedicated to a broader understanding of the political, economic, and especially cultural forces and issues that have shaped the Western Hemispheric experience–its governments and peoples" (p. ii).

THough the United States offered an example of republicanism and economic progress to Venezuelan elites

in the early nineteenth century, the young nation also demonstrated the sense of moral and political superiority that has characterized American attitudes toward Latin America ever since. Thomas Pickering, John Adams' secretary of state, labeled the Latin Americans "corrupt and effeminate beyond example," while Thomas Jefferson noted that history "furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government" and predicted religious and military despotism for the region (p. 16). William Henry Harrison, U.S. minister to Gran Colombia in the late 1820s, typified a continuing procession of American emissaries to Latin America who, Ewell notes, "self-righteously mixed in local politics that they only dimly understood" (p. 34). This belief in Latin American incompetence and inferiority persists throughout the history of inter-American relations, from Pickering and Jefferson to Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and the current U.S. exasperation with the failure of countries such as Colombia and Mexico to curb the drug trade and corruption. By the time of independence, however, Venezuela's early admiration for the United States turned to cautious recognition that the interests of the two nations did not always coincide and that American idealism often gave way to the pursuit of American interests. Ewell argues that as the two countries gradually became more closely engaged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Venezuelans used *astucia*, or cleverness, to ensure a measure of independence from the political and economic reach of its increasingly powerful neighbor (p. 2).

U.S.-Venezuelan relations proceeded relatively smoothly during much of the nineteenth century, especially during the rule of the caudillo, Jose Antonio Paez (1830-1848; 1861-1863). By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, however, both countries entered new stages of development that changed the nature of their relationship. The United States became a world power and imperialist nation, intent on expanding its overseas markets and guided by the social Darwinist belief that strong nations and superior races would dominate weaker nations and peoples. When Cipriano Castro (1898-1908) resisted U.S. influence, American leaders reacted angrily, displaying both their sense of racial superiority and their contempt for Latin Americans who opposed their will. Theodore Roosevelt called Castro "an unspeakably villainous little monkey" (pp. 98-99), demonizing Castro as Americans have done to Pancho Villa, Augusto Sandino, Fidel Castro, and Daniel Ortega. In 1902 Germany, Italy, and Great Britain blockaded the Venezuelan coast in an effort to collect debts, an event that crystallized the emergence of Venezuelan nationalism.

Yet this was one of the last acts of European armed intervention in the Caribbean. By the early twentieth century, the Europeans had largely withdrawn and the United States exercised growing hegemony. Though Theodore Roosevelt badly wanted to take military action against Venezuela, he failed to build the public support he thought necessary to carry out such action. During this period of expansion in the Caribbean area, many U.S. leaders feared absorbing more people of color into the national amalgam. Venezuelans who worked for U.S. oil companies and other foreign-owned businesses in their country resented the often prejudiced treatment they received from their employers, who frequently preferred foreign workers. Such resentment did not go unnoticed. Ewell indicates that "numerous observers from the United States commented on the anti-Americanism of the poor, or 'unenlightened' classes" (p. 109).

In 1908 Venezuela entered twenty-seven years of dictatorship under the iron rule of Juan Vicente Gomez. This brutal but canny didcator avoided foreign military intervention that might have reduced Venezuelan sovereignty but also encouraged the development of the petroleum industry, which moved the country more deeply into the U.S. orbit. By imposing order and paying Venezuela's foreign debts, Gomez removed primary excuses for U.S. intervention during an era of numerous interventions in other Caribbean nations. With the growth of the motor vehicle industry, the demonstration of the importance of petroleum in World War I, and political instability in Mexico, Venezuela became a more important partner of the United States. American governments turned a blind eye to the brutalities of the Gomez regime and agreed with national and foreign elites who justified Gomez as a "democratic Caesar" (p. 107), necessary because of the country's political immaturity and, from the view of the U.S. and some Venezuelans, the racial inferiority of the Venezuelan masses.

The petroleum industry played a major role in transforming Venezuelan politics and society and brought thousands of Americans to Venezuela. Paradoxically, this led to both an anti-American reaction by Venezuelans concerned with defending their culture and the "Americanization" of Venezuela through economic and cultural penetration. Ewell clearly describes fault lines that continue today within the ranks of Venezuelan elites: some embraced the culture and ideas of their powerful northern neighbor; others rejected them. Throughout much of Venezuela's relationship with the United States, there has been a cadre of local elites eager to adopt the policies and

models of progress peddled by Americans, Europeans, or international agencies. In the 1980s and 1990s, U.S.-trained technocrats fully embraced not only neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment but also collaborated enthusiastically in their application, with little attention to the devastating social and economic impact on the majority of Venezuelans.

While petroleum facilitated the modernization of Venezuela, it also transformed its relationship with the United States. The oil companies placed a high priority on stability and, in return, petroleum revenues enabled Gomez and his successors to strengthen the state and tighten its authority over the entire country. U.S.-Venezuelan relations became more complex as business executives and their families, missionaries, human rights groups, scholars, and scientists came to Venezuela with a consumer-oriented lifestyle, which they sought to replicate abroad. Films, journalists, radio, and aviation brought other cultural contacts. Organizations such as the oil companies and the Venezuelan-American Chamber of Commerce became powerful lobbyists seeking to influence Venezuelan and U.S. policies. By the 1940s and 1950s, the Nelson Rockefeller interests, American subsidiaries and retail firms such as Sears, an American church, a daily newspaper in English with 10,000 circulation, an American cultural center, binational schools, English language programs, the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and the YMCA, brought American ideas and living patterns into the Venezuelan milieu. Ewell's analysis of this process is persuasive and fascinating.

What Ewell labels as the "hydrocarbon society" also spawned more complex politics in Venezuela after Gomez' death in 1935. The dictator had ended "chronic wrong-doing" as an excuse for U.S. intervention. From the late 1930s into the Cold War era, American governments and the oil companies seemed content to accept any government that gave them control over oil. The United States was ambivalent about the attempt to create a democracy from 1945 to 1948. It quickly recognized the dictatorial government that ruled from 1948 to 1958, seeking to maintain American economic interests and the flow of cheap oil. As it had during the Gomez era, official United States turned a blind eye to the brutal repression of the Marcos Perez Jimenez dictatorship. Once again the justification emerged that authoritarian governments could prepare "unsophisticated" people for "real" democracy (pp. 154-55). Secretary of State Dean Acheson opposed discussion of the Venezuelan human rights situation in the United Nations, fearing it would draw attention away from Soviet abuses and cause dissension in the Americas (p. 155). The Eisenhower administration decorated Perez Jimenez with the Legion of Merit in 1954 for "special meritorious conduct in the fulfillment of his high functions and anti-communistic attitudes" (p. 160). During the 1950s the U.S. saw as its primary interests the maintenance of petroleum exports and anti-communism, and it accommodated its policies to those goals. As in the Gomez era, such policies identified the United States with a repressive dictator, causing a widespread popular revulsion against American policies that culminated in an angry mob attack on Vice President Richard Nixon during his visit to Venezuela in 1958. Ewell sensitively probes U.S. popular writing about Venezuela in the 1940s and 1950s which, in the Cold War context, justified dictatorship on the grounds that democratic freedoms might allow Communists to gain a foothold among the unsophisticated masses.

Democratic government in Venezuela, the Cuban revolution, and the Alliance for Progress coincided in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Kennedy administration sought to make Venezuela a showcase for democracy and an alternative to the Cuban model. Though the 1960s and early 1970s governments of Romulo Betancourt, Raul Leoni, and Rafael Caldera were anti-Communist, they also sought to pursue Venezuela's interests through multilateral institutions such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The U.S. relationship remained vital, but Venezuela, like Canada and Mexico, sought to restrain U.S. hegemony through multilateral international arrangements.

Ewell contends that Venezuela's petroleum resources have moved the analysis of its relationship with the United States to a global level. The world petroleum market, OPEC, and events in the Middle East have affected much of the Venezuela-U.S. interaction–a global oil shortage and high prices strengthen Venezuela's autonomy as it did during the 1970s; an oil glut and low prices have the opposite effect, as happened during the 1980s when Venezuela sank deeply into debt and adopted a neoliberal economic development strategy.

Ewell suggests that new multilateral arrangements and alliances may provide weaker nations such as Venezuela with more leverage in dealing with the United States. One hopes that she is right. Certainly Canada, a new member of the Organization of American States and increasingly active in inter-American affairs, has long pursued multilateralism as a strategy to curb the overwhelming power and influence of the United States. The fierce resistance of interests within the United States to constraints imposed by multilateral arrangements or organizations, however, raises questions about U.S. will-

ingness to abide by international arrangements when these seem to limit the pursuit of its goals. A case in point is the current U.S. effort to avoid World Trade Organization and European Union rulings on the extra-territoriality of the Helms-Burton law by claiming that the Cuba embargo is a case of national security. And, from a global perspective, one of the organizing principles in international relations that seems to be emerging after the Cold War is that of rich nations versus poor nations: the former, with the help of the IMF and the World Bank, extract wealth from poorer and weaker countries; the latter band together wherever possible to defend their resources and sovereignty. For the moment, however, multilateralism in the Americas appears to have only marginally constrained the role of the United States.

This quibble aside, I highly recommend *Venezuela and the United States* for anyone interested in U.S. involvement in Latin America. It is well written, well documented, and informed by the author's superb grasp of Venezuelan history.

Notes

[1]. Stephen G. Rabe. "Marching Ahead (Slowly): The Historiography of Inter-American Relations," *Diplomatic History* 13, 3 (Summer 1989): 297-316.

[2]. Among others, these include: Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Bruce J. Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic During the U.S. Occupation of 1916-1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S. Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977); Walter La Feber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Louis A. Perez, Jr., *Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986); Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900-1934* (Lexington, Ky.: Wadsworth Press, 1983); William O. Walker III, *Drug Control in the Americas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981); Friederich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This review may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permissions, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: George W. Schuyler. Review of Ewell, Judith, *Venezuela and the United States: From Monroe's Hemisphere to Petroleum's Empire.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=852

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.