

**Jeremy Kuzmarov.** “Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence, and Nation-Building in the ‘American Century.’” *Diplomatic History* (April 2009): 191-221. DOI:

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Review by **Kyle Longley, Arizona State University**

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In the early 1960s, a Mexican diplomat observed following the creation of the School of the Americas in Panama that “give me the names of those first 60 students, and I’ll pick your president of Latin America for the next 10 years.” Others worried, including Chester Bowles, Kennedy’s Undersecretary of State, who lamented: “We are failing to build in our training programs for foreign military personnel an understanding of the values and practices of democratic society.”<sup>1</sup>

While some historians have examined the role of the military in training in the Third World, a more underappreciated subject has been the role of training of police who often became instruments of terror and repression, especially in Latin America and Southeast Asia. As this article’s author, Jeremy Kuzmarov, observes, police training fits well into the scholarship that has developed about U.S. foreign relations relating to modernization and anti-Communist nation building. The police training in particular through the Office of Public Safety (OPS) in the 1960s within the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) related to social control, “the ultimate marker of modernity in the postenlightenment era.”(193)

Kuzmarov clearly outlines his thesis. “With remarkable continuity, police aid was used not just to target criminals but to develop elaborate intelligence networks oriented towards internal defense, which allowed the suppression of dissident groups to take place on a wider scope and in a more surgical and often brutal way.” (192) He continues that the militarization of the police force “provided them with a newfound perception of power” which when combined with the intense anti-Communist orientation “fostered the dehumanization of political adversaries and bred suspicion about grass-roots

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Kyle Longley, *In the Eagle’s Shadow: The United States and Latin America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 244.

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mobilization.” This often ensured brutality toward anyone challenging the status quo, especially among the many dictatorships of Latin America. He concludes that “although the United States was not always in control of the forces that it empowered and did not always condone their acts, human rights violations were not by accident or the product of rogue forces betraying American principles, as some have previously argued. They were rather institutionalized within the fabric of American policy and its coercive underpinnings.” (192-93)

While covering the activities of OPS globally, the major case study contained within the article focuses on efforts in South Vietnam during the 1960s. The OPS ultimately replaced the Michigan State University Group in 1961. Soon, it poured in hundreds of advisers and hundreds of millions of dollars to fulfill Robert Kennedy’s goal of teaching “these guys more than just how to direct traffic.” (191) OPS officials created a force that conducted surveillance, administered interrogations, established methods to interdict enemy supplies, ran prisons, and tried to contain the corrosive drug trade. Regarding the latter, Kuzmarov (who builds off the work for his forthcoming book, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs*) notes that “as with broader modernization programs, local noncooperation and resistance to American drug policies was enhanced by the attempt to impose Western societal standards there were not necessarily universal.” (214) Ultimately, “from the perspective of Vietnamese nationalists, OPS advisers served as a symbol of foreign coercion and imperialism, especially in light of repressive tactics employed by their protégés.” (215) The tactics of the American allies often backfired and drove previously neutral Vietnamese into the folds of the Viet Cong.

Kuzmarov clearly ties the historical evolution of police training in the 1960s and 1970s to contemporary events in Iraq. He quotes Dick Cheney from 2004 arguing that the United States should pursue a “Salvador option” in Iraq with the training of the military, police, and paramilitary groups (191). He observes a “stark continuity from the Cold War and imperial eras” regarding the U.S. assistance to the local police that was presented to the public as “humanitarian initiatives to strengthen democratic development” but really “fulfilled a less explicit agenda in securing the power base of local elites amenable to U.S. economic and political interests and contributed to extensive human rights violations.” (192) Ultimately, they often ensured the opposite results and bred “animosities and resistance” and created violence, not stability. They also undermined the image of the United States in the Third World as well as internally, often torpedoing the original intent and damaging U.S. credibility. Thus, for Kuzmarov, the abuses of Abu Ghraib and the human rights violations by Iraq security forces only confirm the continuing problems faced in America’s interaction with the Third World.

This thought provoking articles clearly outlining a roadmap toward a monograph has many significant ideas. However, there are several areas that could be further developed, although I recognize the limitations of taking on such a large topic within the framework of a journal article.

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One of the major challenges remains the incorporation of the non-U.S. side of the equation. The cultural context of the country where the training took place is often invisible. For example, in the section on the South Vietnamese training program, virtually no discussion exists of the long-term development of police forces, either from before the arrival of the French or during the colonial period. Kuzmarov could further develop his argument by building upon the idea that cultural blindness prohibited American trainers from developing effective police forces in the south. He hints at this with a discussion of the language barriers, but a great deal more remains to be done. Also, incorporating such factors could help enhance the significance of his thesis for contemporary policymakers, many whom fail to comprehend that it is difficult to impose an American model onto the foundations of a country whose history often dates back thousands of years and differs dramatically from their own.

Another challenge of the article is the tendency to utilize a broad brush to paint the picture. For Kuzmarov, the results of the training appear uniform as the police training created a repressive force that served as a mechanism for social control. For example, not all police forces that received training from the OPS became the instruments of authoritarianism. One example that could serve as a good counter to the overall view is that of Costa Rica (as well as others such as Uruguay). Without an army, the Costa Rican Civil Guard and local police constituted the security forces in the small Central American republic. Local law enforcement received training from various American agencies, just like their Panamanian and Nicaraguan neighbors. Yet, they did not become the agents of oppression like the others. Explaining the exception to the rule could help underscore why differences could exist and assist in the development of local conditions and their effect.

While exceptions existed to the overall pattern, the results of police training in the emerging world usually fit clearly into Kuzmarov's thesis. Like U.S. support for military groups, those with the police had deleterious effects on local political cultures, as American allies often became notorious human rights violators. Kuzmarov clearly notes that such trend rarely ensured long-term stability sought by U.S. policymakers, but often guaranteed more disorder as the repression sowed the seeds of violence and anti-Americanism in nations such as in Nicaragua in 1978 and Iran in 1979. Thus, the support of the local police and paramilitary groups that often created a lasting legacy of "the dark side of American modernization and social control efforts and the high human cost of informal empire." (221) This article helps question the narratives of American exceptionalism and triumphalism such as those of John Lewis Gaddis that ignore some of the darker chapters of America's role in the world, especially in the Cold War and its aftermath in places such as Iraq. It is a welcome addition to the historical literature that will undoubtedly serve as a precursor to a larger study on the topic.

**Kyle Longley** is the Snell Family Dean's Distinguished Professor of History and Political Science at Arizona State University. He received his doctorate from the University of Kentucky in 1994 where he studied under the guidance of George

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Herring. He is the author of *The Sparrow and the Hawk: Costa Rica and the United States During the Rise of José Figueres* (1997, winner of the A.B. Thomas Prize for outstanding book from the South Eastern Council on Latin American Studies), *In the Eagle's Shadow: The United States and Latin America* (2002, second edition 2009); *Senator Albert Gore, Sr.: Tennessee Maverick* (2004); editor and contributor to *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (2006), and *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (2008). Currently, he is putting the finishing touches on *The Houses of the Purple Hearts: The Morenci Nine and Small Town America During the Vietnam War* and collaborating on a book on American foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with Admiral Jim Stavridis, current U.S. Commander, SOUTHCOM, and nominee for Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

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