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Military Aid on the Periphery

Bradley Lynn Coleman’s *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939-1960* is an admirably detailed account of the development and transformation of a military relationship between these two powers. A tightly focused monograph, the work is, in its style, sources, and focus, on the boundary between military and diplomatic history. It forms part of Kent State University Press’ s New Studies in U.S. Foreign Relations Series, edited by Mary Ann Heiss. Coleman argues that the Colombians exercised significant agency, shaping the relationship to meet their own ends. He concludes that Colombia, despite the clear power differential in the relationship, was able to extract increasing amounts of military aid and other types of support from the United States. By the 1960s, Colombia had even managed to overcome U.S. reluctance and gain support for its primary military goal, suppressing internal political violence.

In Coleman’s story the changes in the relationship are driven by a series of crises, the most important of which were World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, and *la Violencia* within Colombia itself. Colombia was on the periphery of the first three of these issues; nevertheless, these significant world events shaped this inter-American relationship by steadily increasing the degree and scope of military cooperation between the two.

World War II made U.S. leaders think seriously about a security partnership with Colombia. As Max Paul Friedman has demonstrated in *Nazis and Good Neighbors* (2003), U.S. leaders up to and including Franklin D. Roosevelt were frightened that Nazi agents would use Colombia as base from which to menace U.S. interests in Latin America, most particularly the Panama Canal. What Coleman adds to this story is a look at how those fears spurred the creation of a bilateral military relationship and the first significant improvement in Colombian-U.S. relations since Panamanian independence. The cooperation was halting at first, plagued by problems such as U.S. military advisors who did not speak Spanish. Ultimately though, the World War II cooperation laid the foundation for decades of military connections, and the Colombians strengthened their armed forces with about eight million dollars in Lend-Lease aid.

The end of World War II ushered in a period in which many Latin American nations grew wary of further cooperation with the United States. The war had enhanced their economic dependence on the United States by weakening or isolating potential alternatives, and raised desires for development aid that were not fulfilled as the United States concentrated on European reconstruction in the late 1940s. Many nations responded coolly to U.S. requests for Cold War cooperation. Colombians, on the other hand, saw utility in positioning their nation as the most willing of U.S. allies in the region. The high point of this strategy was the decision by Colombian leaders to contribute combat troops to the Korean War effort, making it the only Latin American nation to...
do so. Colombia initially contributed one infantry battalion and one warship to the conflict and received a great deal in exchange. The United States outfitted, supplied, and provided additional training for these troops at low cost; in fact, much of the equipment was simply given to the Colombians after the war. In addition to valuable combat experience, Colombian forces also forged crucial relationships with U.S. officers, relationships which would continue to pay dividends over the next decade as the Colombian army sought support for its internal security problems. Although participation in Korea did yield real benefits in military aid contributions throughout the 1950s, Colombians occasionally overplayed their hand, as when they put in a request for $150,000,000 of Military Assistance Program (MAP) aid in 1955. When it became clear that this vast sum was beyond the realm of possibility, President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla distanced himself from the failed scheme by denouncing it as having been “drawn up by a lot of idiots” (p. 159).

Probably the most fascinating part of Coleman’s work is the discussion of *La Violencia*, a period of political violence lasting roughly from 1946-58. Colombia’s internal violence allows Coleman to speak to many of the most important issues in U.S.-Latin American relations after World War II. U.S. leaders had to decide whether internal violence required a U.S. response, and if so, how to pick sides. U.S. administrations further had to decide whether they were more interested in democracy or stability in Colombia. Their ultimate decision in favor of supporting a military regime and stability over democratic principles will surprise no one, but what Coleman does very nicely in this case study is provide the context that helps make that Machiavellian trade-off comprehensible. U.S. leaders saw no realistic democratic alternative, and came to see a military interregnum as the most likely path toward a democratic future, a future that seemed increasingly unlikely to result from the paroxysms of violence on the ground in Colombia. This period transformed Colombia politically, resulting in the unique power-sharing agreement between liberals and conservatives called the National Front, which “split elected and appointed posts evenly between the two parties and alternated the four-year presidency between a Liberal officeholder and a Conservative one” (p. 177).

The result is a work that makes a nice contribution to the emerging body of bilateral studies focused on what Robert McMahon has called *The Cold War on the Periphery* (1996). Coleman also rightly points out that the U.S.-Colombian relationship has been understudied. As such it is hard to fault his claim to have written “the most comprehensive account of U.S.-Colombian security relations to date” (p. ix).

Coleman’s attention to military detail is useful, but his bias in favor of this facet leads him to give some of the most interesting parts of his narrative short shrift. For example, he includes a few tantalizing pages regarding religiously motivated violence and persecution of U.S. Protestants in Colombia and the subsequent diplomatic consequences. This is a fascinating interaction, and focusing more attention on the international actions of U.S.-based religious organizations would be a useful direction for diplomatic historians. The religious story is made all the more interesting by its political connections, as Protestants in Colombia tended to identify with the Liberal Party. As it is, his treatment of religious violence in Colombia feels very compact, and his conclusions somewhat oddly evenhanded. For example, Coleman suggests that some religious groups “contributed to their own suffering,” which included being the victims of acts of violence, by “distributing offensive literature and mailing uncivil letters” (p. 124).

The connections between U.S. and Colombian troops in Korea could also be fodder for an interesting analysis of the social and cultural implications of that contact. Instead, while these contacts are listed, they are not explored or analyzed in any thoroughgoing sort of way. The reader ends up knowing more than they need to about the intricate itinerary of deployment, but less than they might want to about the lasting effects of the war for Colombian troops. Did they bring back cultural artifacts? Were they exposed to political ideals or social norms that challenged preconceptions? How, in turn, were they treated? Coleman points out that U.S. officers came to respect and value the Colombians’ military contribution, but there are also some hints at condescension. When during one of the most significant battles in which Colombian troops participated they were forced off a hill by Chinese forces, U.S. leaders seemed to feel that the withdrawal was a result of Colombian errors, and implied that U.S. troops would not have lost the hill. Coleman expertly analyzes the military situation, offering a moderate conclusion which partially redeems the Colombian efforts, but more could be said about U.S. officers’ sense of racial or cultural hierarchy.

Another fascinating issue that would be profitably expanded upon is the struggle over the control of foreign policy in the United States. During this period, the military seems to have had the infrastructure, personnel, connections, and will to chart the U.S. relationship with
Colombia. The State Department appears as a peripheral actor at best in much of the story. This was not uncommon in Latin America and has some nice parallels to works such as Eric Paul Roorda’s *The Dictator Next Door* (1998) about Rafael Trujillo’s relationship with the United States. The Dominican relationship was also dominated by military officials who had closer ties and better institutional connections to the regime.

The writing style is clear and precise. Occasionally, the mechanics of sourcing and diplomacy can get in the way of the argument and one has the impression of reading a succession of closely paraphrased documents, rather than an argument into which documentary evidence is organically woven. Overall, however, the attention to detail is appreciated. This precision carries over into the organization, which is tight and lucid.

Coleman has done an admirable job in mining government archives in the United States and Colombia. The results of his efforts are laid out in a useful essay on archival material. It is particularly useful on the Colombian side, outlining which document series are available to researchers and describing Colombian institutions. Something that emerges from this information is the difficulty of getting a handle on the period of *la Violencia*. Much of the archival record was allegedly destroyed in a fire. Graduate students or others planning first-time research in Colombian sources would do well to peruse this essay as a first stop.

I have suggested some ways in which this monograph could be improved, but it is a substantial work in its present form. With *Colombia and the United States*, Coleman has created a reference for the U.S.-Colombian relationship that should be useful to scholars and teachers for years to come. I foresee myself mining details from it for both course preparation and research.

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