

Yanqui go home

Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in US-Latin American Relations
 Alan McPherson
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Reviewed by Gavin O'Toole

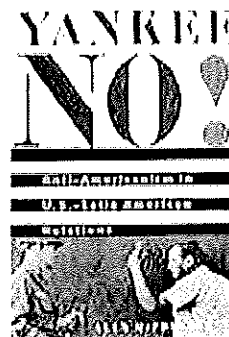
It is almost certainly forgotten that the first enemies of the United States to gloat about the decapitation of a captured Marine did so much closer to home than the sub-contractors of al-Qaeda in the backstreets of Baghdad. Indeed, Augusto Sandino's "crazy little army" of guerrillas stalking Nicaragua's Segovia mountains with machetes drawn celebrated their bloodthirsty act of empowerment by minting a gold coin featuring their prey. It is even more striking that this probable act in the late 1920s occurred a lifetime before Osama bin Laden unleashed his own, very particular brand of anti-Americanism and precipitated the current wave of US interventions.

The parallels drawn by Alan McPherson between anti-Americanism past and present are a revelation for those of us ignorant of historical detail or prone to complacency. It is remarkable how many comparisons can be made between what is occurring now in the Middle East and the experience of Latin America. Therein lies the first of many lessons that can be drawn from this eloquent exploration of a hatred that burns in the hearts of wretched peoples: Washington learnt to ride the bronco of anti-Americanism in its own backyard and, in general, it applies this experience with calculation elsewhere. McPherson's book provides powerful evidence that behind today's headlines mourning the loss of US moral leadership and highlighting the self-doubt of America's thinking public lies a much more complex dynamic and policy process that, subject to historical reflection, draws upon ample precedence from within its Latin American training grounds.

This is little comfort for Latin Americanists who may be irked by how they have been sidelined by the current obsession with the Middle East – but, as McPherson's study reveals, Latin America provides an invaluable source of examples which scholars of it might at least employ in broader international relations analysis. Bin Laden is merely the third in a line of global hate figures characterised in rhetoric as enemies of US civilisation and so hunted for their pelts. His predecessors were both Latin Americans: Che Guevara and Carlos the Jackal.

McPherson's timely study is built upon an examination of a key phase in the relationship between the United States and the disunited states of Latin America – the period in which a mass-based anti-Americanism became evident from the disastrous "goodwill" visit of vice-president Richard Nixon to South America in 1958 until the US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. The spittle directed by resentful Venezuelans at Nixon's motorcade engendered a turning point in US foreign policy analysis, literally washing away the complacency that had characterised Washington's attitude towards grievances south of the Rio Grande.

As McPherson writes, anti-Americanism began to force US policymakers to re-examine their rationales for world leadership. The Cuban revolution in 1959 introduced a note of panic into this process, yet it also demonstrated a rapid ability across administrations to adjust to anti-Americanism and contemplate local circumstances. It gave the US a new ideological confidence in the Cold War atmosphere, and that confidence was deployed to effect during the Panama riots of 1964. In particular,



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"It is remarkable how many comparisons can be made between what is occurring now in the Middle East and the experience of Latin America"

US diplomats began to pay attention to the underlying social conflicts in Panama's divided society, fooling local elites into believing they had won more than they had. The value of local divisions – and hence the atomised nature of anti-Americanism that made local leaders vulnerable to US pressure – would prove to be the key to Washington's pragmatic and ultimately patient strategy in the Dominican Republic in the course of 1965.

McPherson uses these examples to highlight three recurrent features of anti-Americanism that have shaped Washington's outlook: first and foremost, its inherent variability across territories, classes and historical traditions, allowing country-specific responses to be developed in much the same way as diplomats today have forged bilateral alliances with individual Middle Eastern states. A second feature of anti-Americanism is its inherent ambivalence – the common espousal of contradictory feelings towards the US at one and the same time. In Latin America, this has meant that the refrain "Yankee go home" has more often than not been accompanied by a quietly muttered "... and take me with you". Such ambivalence is much in evidence in the Middle East, where resentment of the US is often expressed alongside admiration and pale imitation. A third feature of anti-Americanism is the sheer resilience of the US response to it, and it is this that is probably most in question today. Historically, at least, the ideological consistency that has been displayed by the US in response to anti-Americanism has been underplayed. This assertiveness in the face of what has generally been perceived as a form of cultural resistance to US power has revealed a reservoir of self-confidence that in turn has reinforced America's own identity and sense of purpose. This helps to explain the damage and self-doubt caused by recent revelations about the military abuse of prisoners in Iraq and the labyrinth of anomalies that has been constructed around the status of detainees from Afghanistan. But it also provides clues about the likely outcome of the debate that is unfolding in the US and its responses.

McPherson's book will become a core text in the study of US-Latin American relations, and has surely earned a place on the broader international relations syllabus. By removing the dressing from the sore of anti-Americanism, he has exposed the agonising tension between the momentous themes of democracy and power that has torn at America's heart since it began to pound on the global stage.

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