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**THE “AMERICAN FACTOR” AND SPANISH
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LATINOAMÉRICA**

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The “American Factor” and Spanish American Democracy

EL “FACTOR DE AMÉRICA” Y LA
DEMOCRACIA EN LATINOAMÉRICA

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RESUMEN El “factor de América” y la democracia en América Latina. Las contradicciones entre la “poderosa” ideología democrática de los Estados Unidos y la realidad de la política de su poder comenzó a influir en América Latina hace más de un siglo, pero durante la guerra fría cuando esta contradicción tuvo repercusión global. La larga lucha de las antiguas colonias españolas en América para construir democracias estables aún

necesitan superar obstáculos históricos y principalmente políticos, sociales y culturales de carácter interno. La hegemonía de Estados Unidos en la región favorecían, e incluso frustraban los esfuerzos de América Latina por crear modernos y democráticos sistemas políticos “responsables”. Tras la guerra fría el “factor americano” ha tenido cada vez menos influencia en el desarrollo político de la región, e incluso se debe considerar como una de las razones por las que ha sido más difícil el proceso de modernización de la política en América Latina.

1 The General Framework

The contradictions between the powerful democratic ideology of the U.S. and the reality of its power politics began in Latin America more than a century ago. But it was during the Cold War that such a contradiction became global. The long struggle of the former Spanish colonies in America to built stable political democracies had –still has- to overcome overwhelming historical political, social and cultural obstacles of internal nature. The U.S. hegemony over the region did not help but frequently thwarted Latin American efforts to create modern democratic and social

In the post Cold War world the “American Factor” is becoming less and less relevant in the political development of our region but it has to be counted as one of the reasons that made more difficult the Latin American journey from unviable to modern political systems.

1.1 The Point of Departure

Latin America is a concept coined in the XIX century that covers –and hides– a great space and also a great diversity of societies and nation-states. Political, economic, cultural or social generalizations about the region will always have to accept exceptions. By the end of the XIX century but surely after the end of World War I, all Latin American countries have, in addition to certain common cultural and historical traits, one shared characteristic: all of them belong to the U.S. exclusive sphere of influence. Such influence –Empire in the sense of domination or control can be an alternative and appropriate concept– has had a direct or indirect effect on the nature of the region’s political regimes including the democratic ones, in so far as democracy has being able to take roots in the region.

Since its independence, Latin America has been the target of several and often contradictory foreign political, economic and cultural influences. U.S. political influence has been greater and started earlier in Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America but since the end of World War II the political development of the whole region can’t be fully explained without introducing “the American factor” as a significant and sometimes determining variable.

In this essay the “American factor” will be used as a kind of summary –and simplification– of U.S. impact in the development (or underdevelopment) of democracy in Latin America. At some point, the driving force of this factor can be Washington’s bureaucracy but it can also be individual members of Congress, lobbies, the media, churches, labor unions or some other pressure or interest groups. In some instances, the U.S. policies in Latin America are the result of a kind of triangulation: pressures from actors outside the region or by other Latin American governments or political actors that have access to Washington policy makers.

The guiding idea or hypothesis of this interpretation of U.S. policies in Latin America and their impact in the political development of the region is a rather simple one: the basic and most important elements in the process of political development in Latin America, including democratization or lack of it, were and remain rooted in internal factors. Blames for failures and praises for successes in the realm of political development in the former Spanish and Portuguese American empires belongs mainly to indigenous factors. The role of external actors and influences in such developments is important and at some times crucial, but in the long run external variables seldom can provide the key for understanding the process. In spite of having adopted formal democratic and republican institutions since its independence in the 1820’s (the exception was Brazil, a monarchy until

1889) in the end Latin American societies were unable to institutionalize a set of solid and working democratic political systems as it was the case in the U.S. and Canada.

The root of democracy's failure south of the Rio Bravo has a lot to do with the peculiarities of the colonial history and a very chaotic 19th century. If some regions of the Iberian empires in America were a success as colonies, after independence the great majority of them became failed nations. It is in this historical scenario that one can find the original reasons that explain the poor quality of governments in Latin America.

However, in the 19th century the U.S. took advantage and even fomented some of those failures of political development in Latin America; Mexico was a good example of this. In Central America and the Caribbean Washington accepted dictatorship as normal and the disintegration of national unity as convenient as was the case with Colombia and Panama.

Since the early 20th century there were of course instances in which Washington openly fought non democratic element in Latin America as it was the case of the military dictatorship of Victoriano Huerta in Mexico during Woodrow Wilson's presidency and immediately after the end of II World War. Nevertheless, in the last century and for a long period Washington had no problem in encouraging, supporting and benefiting from dictatorships and authoritarianism in the area (Mazza, 2000: 1).

1.2 The Role of History

The social, economic and political history of Latin America –from the prehispanic and colonial times- can account for much of the troubles the region has had for the last two centuries with political, economic and social development.

Previous to the arrival of Europeans, native societies in America were one of the few examples of original complex civilizations. They developed from nomadic hunting and gatherers to dense and urban societies without external significant contacts or influence. Until the end of the 15th century, every important change and improvement, from domestication of corn, writing, mathematics, astronomic observations, religion, administration of complex urban centers and theocratic government, was an original creation of native Americans.

In regard to the social and political systems, from Aztec, Mayans to Incas, they created complex but not always stable political systems. Some were very hierarchical and authoritarian structures of domination in which an aristocracy of warriors and priests dominated through a very strong state and harsh discipline and some developed a complex and efficient administrative structures like the Incas¹.

¹Enrique Florescano, 1997; Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexican History*, 1989; Frank Salomon, Schwartz Stuart, *The CambridgeHistory of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, 1999.

The colonial administration in Iberian America made good use of some of the original bases of authoritarian domination. In some regions African slaves were introduced to supply manpower as was the case in the Caribbean and Brazil. But in places with a dense demography and complex native structures of domination --like in Mesoamerica or the Andean region--, native caciques or political bosses were used as intermediaries between the Indian and the European or Creole societies. If there was something resembling self rule during the colonial period it was only at the very local level (*cabildo and repúblicas*) but the macro system was the dominion of royal bureaucracies in an epoch of absolutism (Burkholder, Chandler, 1977).

The contrast between Iberian America and British America at the beginning of the 18th century can be useful in explaining a great deal of the political and cultural differences between the two parts of the Western Hemisphere. Iberian America was dominated by what can be labeled "exploitation colonies" and British America by "population colonies". The English settlers, as J. H. Elliott has explained, originally intended to replicate in the north what the Spanish had done in the south but for many reasons it became an impossible task. Lacking an alternative, they had to develop this population model (Elliott, 2006: 3-114).

On the other hand, Spain did not and could not support massive migration to America. Self rule and light presence of royal authorities was the essence of New England's system of government but that could not be the case in Spanish America where the native population was the overwhelming majority and the presence of royal administrators a Crown's necessity. Self rule was a practical impossibility where natives were the main source of labor for mines, plantations or textile mills. A kind of self government was natural in North America and an impracticality in the South².

A quest for independence at the end of the 18th century was the expected outcome of the conflict of interests between King George and his subjects in the colonies in North America. There was similar contradiction of interests between the Creole elite and the king in Madrid after the Bourbon economic and political reforms --aiming at extracting more resources from America- but loyalty to the king was already a deep rooted idea in the Spanish dominions (Kuethe, Lowell, 1991: 579-607). It was the unexpected invasion of Spain and Portugal by Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century that provided the impulse for rebellion and eventually of independence in the Spanish colonies. However, the nature of the political institutions and the social and cultural structures of Iberian America were far from adequate to replicate the success of the United States in the process of democratic nation building.

The 19th century was a time of political turmoil and in some cases even

²"The classic explanation of the historical origins of U.S. democracy", *Democracy in America*, Alexis Tocqueville, 1969, 32-39. For a more detailed account on the first immigrations to New England and a general interpretation of its political consequences, see Louis B. Wright et. al., *The Democratic Experience. A Short American History*, 1963, chapters 1-2.

economic regression. Spanish America went in a journey from independence to underdevelopment while the U.S. used that century to proceed with its territorial expansion, political reconfiguration, demographic growth through massive migration from Europe and finally to its industrial revolution (Coatsworth, 1998). An outcome of such different stories was that countries south of the Rio Grande became the first zone of influence of the United States as an emergent power. American political institutions were taken as a model by almost all of the former Spanish colonies but the transplanted failed because they could not find the proper social and economic soil to grow.

European governments and companies –mainly from England and France– were central at the beginning of Latin America’s journey into nationhood, but by the end of the century, the U.S. growing power guided by the “Monroe Doctrine” was effectively able to neutralize European political actions in México, Central America and the Caribbean first and, in the southern part of the continent, later. The need to have stable and propitious conditions for trade and investment, led the U.S. to support stability over any other consideration in Latin America. Washington’s approach to the political development of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies was from the very beginning an extremely pragmatic one. If a dictator or an authoritarian elite could provide the adequate environment for business U.S. had no quarrel with non democratic forms of government.

Since the end of the 19th century and above all other considerations, Americans wanted from their southern neighbors stability to permit the development of trade and investment. Beyond some public declarations, they never considered necessary to invest heavily in democracy in that part of the Western Hemisphere. Since the very beginning, the American ruling elite suspected Spanish-Americans unfit for such a sophisticated system of government. The “Black Legend” of Spain combined with Indian, black and mestizo population made South America, from the point of view of Anglo-Saxon Americans, a social and cultural brew toxic for democracy. Representative of the opinions in Washington about Latin America was the one expressed by John Adams: “to talk about democracy in Spanish America could be equal to talk about the subject among beasts, birds and fishes” (Quoted, Fuentes Mares, 1998: 12).

The U.S. need for stability in Latin America had to do not only with business reasons but also with a quest for depriving European powers of any excuse to intervene in the region. It was for that reason that the U.S. played the role of police in the Caribbean and Central America since the end of the 19th century. That was the main reason for American military and political interventions in the area. But it was only in the case of Mexico and after the first stages of a spectacular social upheaval that president Woodrow Wilson attempted a kind of political engineering to transform a conservative military coup d’état into the beginning of a real political democratic system. The aim of such political experiment was not altruistic but realistic: to introduce long term political stability in the southern border of the United States through political modernization (Meyer, 1991: 215-232). At the end,

In the 1930's, for reasons that had to do more with the consequences of the breakdown of the international system created at Versailles and very little with Latin America itself. President Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated the so called "Good Neighbor Policy" whose core idea was the principle of non-intervention, a peculiar one in a power relationship between one big nation and a multitude of weak ones. During this atypical period, Washington tried to promote democracy although with little enthusiasm not only in Mexico but also in Peru, Ecuador, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala. At the end the results were not substantial and in many cases the process ended favoring the establishment of strong and brutal dictatorships as was the case in Nicaragua or the Dominican Republic, among others (Drake, 1991: 3-40). In any case, during World War II and with the exception of Argentina, Latin America supported the U.S. against the Axis in the name of democracy although democracy was a rare commodity in the region.

Abraham Lowenthal, a expert on U.S. Latin American relations, sustains that "From the turn of the [20th] century until the 1980's, the overall impact of U.S. policy on Latin America's ability to achieve democratic politics was usually negligible, often counterproductive, and only occasionally positive" (Lowenthal, 1991: 383). The historical lesson is clear: "Democracy is not an export commodity; it cannot simply be shipped from one setting to another. By its very nature, democracy must be achieved by each nation largely on its own" (Lowenthal, 1991: 403). True, in this field there is no substitute for self-help but support or resistance from the external environment can be important.

1.3 The Cold War

The logic of the Cold War made Washington prefer in Latin America and elsewhere to support strong anticommunist regimes over unstable and unreliable pluralistic and relatively democratic systems in Spanish America³. The reformist attempt in Guatemala led by two colonels between 1944 to 1954, was finally branded as a communist conspiracy by the U.S. government after president Jacobo Arbenz began a policy of agrarian reform that affected the interest of a powerful American enterprise: the United Fruit Company. Arbenz was accused of looking for soviet support and overthrown in June 1954 after a rightist rebellion led by Carlos Castillo Armas, a rebellion that was organized and openly supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Immerman, 1982). That reactionary coup was the

³ Stephen G. Rabe concluded that during the Cold War, "communist, not dictators, were the enemies of the United States" in *Eisenhower and Latin America: The foreign policy of Anticommunism*, 1988, 30-36. For a general revision of the American support to Latin American dictators, see Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States . A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*, 1998, especially chapters16-19; Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century. U.S.-Latin American Relations Since 1889*, 2000, 142-248; Michael T. Klare and Cynthia Arnson, "Exporting Repression: U.S. Support for Authoritarianism in Latin America", in *Capitalism and the U.S.-Latin American Relation*, Richard R. Fagen, 1979, 138-168.

beginning not of Guatemala's democracy but of a several decades brutal civil and ethnic war whose consequences still lingering in Guatemala and in Central America. Democracy in Guatemala is still today an open question.

The triumph of the guerillas of Fidel Castro over the U.S. backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in 1959 and the transformation of a nationalist and perhaps liberal and democratic rebellion into a socialist revolution, constitutes a powerful explanation of why military takeovers and totalitarian regimes in the 1960's and 1970's received support and even encouragement from Washington in the cases of Guatemala, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay or Chile among others. The consolidation of a Marxist regime in Cuban also explains among many other things the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 which acted not against a revolution but a mere constitutionalist-democratic movement led by a reformist colonel Francisco Caamaño on behalf of a *bona fide* democratic president Juan Bosch.

The same reasons that explain Washington support of anti communist actors and forces in Latin America in the 1950's and 1960's explain also the support of the U.S. in 1973 to the Chilean military in its coup that put a dramatic and bloody end to one of the few genuine and promising political democracies in Latin America. The U.S. government had no problem in encouraging and even helping in the overthrow of a socialist government even though such government had arrived to power after democratic elections of Salvador Allende in 1970.

The victory of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 against the political dynasty of the Somoza –a family strongly supported by the United States since 1937- triggered a very strong counter revolutionary reaction in the U.S. Nicaragua's relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union were neutralized by U.S. support not only of conservative forces in Nicaragua but of very repressive regimes in other Central American countries trough the 1980's.

1.4 After the cold War

Central America in the 1980's was one of the last arenas in which the Cold War was fought. President Ronald Reagan choose that region to confront the Soviet Union because the United States had all the advantages and the Soviets had very little incentives to pay the economic and political price required to effectively back leftist governments or movements in such a far away land. At the same time, Cuba had the incentives but not the resources to lend effective support to Nicaragua or the guerrillas in Guatemala or El Salvador.

Washington openly organized the so called "*contra*" (for counter-revolutionary) movement in Nicaragua, isolated the Mexican effort to mediate between Managua and Washington and forced the sandinistas to call for free elections in 1990 which they lost to a well financed rightist coalition headed by Violeta Chamorro in 1990. It was only after the sandinistas were defeated in the electoral arena and the Cold War was over

that Washington put political democracy above defeating the left in its Central American agenda. It is interesting to notice that in 2006 the sandinistas were back in Nicaragua and this time using the ballot box as the instrument of their return to power and forcing U.S. to recognize the legitimacy of their victory. However, the present relationship between Nicaragua's government and Washington remains very uneasy.

After very difficult negotiations, civil wars ended in El Salvador in December of 1992 and in Guatemala four years later. Central America is now a region dominated by democratic regimes because the former leftist rebels and conservative governments finally recognized each other as legitimate political actors and accepted democracy as the best alternative to violent confrontation in which neither could fully destroy the other.

U.S. role was decisive in reaching this solution but only after its victory over the Soviet Union and the neutralization of Cuban influence. However, after decades of extremely violent political struggle –more than sixty years in the case of El Salvador and more than thirty in the case of Guatemala- the atmosphere in both countries is still far from peaceful and the quality of their democracies is not particularly high.

The so called “Third Wave of Democracy” started in Europe –Spain, Portugal or Greece- in the 1970's and eventually began to reach Latin American shores. While Jimmy Carter's administration used a human rights policy mainly to put pressure upon the Soviet Union and China, it had some unavoidable secondary effects on Latin America that halted some of the worst excesses of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes.

The conservative administration of Reagan through Jeane Kirkpatrick –U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations- incorporated into its Latin American policy what became to be known as “Kirkpatrick Doctrine”. It's essence was a distinction between authoritarian pro Western regimes and totalitarian and Marxist ones. The U.S. had a natural inclination for democratic systems but under certain circumstances its national interests – ideological and economic- required to put aside such inclination and support conservative and undemocratic authoritarians in order to neutralize or defeat revolutionary and communists movements or governments (Kirkpatrick, 1979).

In the cases of non democratic regimes in Chile, Paraguay, Panama and Haiti, Reagan's diplomacy exerted mild pressure demanding some kind of political opening mainly as a result of democratic groups and movements within the U.S. (Carothers, 1991: 149-150). This was the case in Chile where, in 1988, Pinochet was forced to accept a plebiscite and lost his bid for a further eight years in the presidency. The elections of next year were the first step for the reintroduction of democracy in Chile.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 combined with the Human Rights movements in the U.S., Europe and Latin America, were very effective in encouraging “military Juntas” to step down as was the case in Brazil or Uruguay. A disastrous defeat in its war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands meant the end of Argentinean military dictatorship. In Mexico the

economic and political failures after 1982 lead in the year 2000 to the peaceful end of the longest and most successful authoritarian system in the Western Hemisphere and the beginning of a not very easy path towards a working democracy. At best, Argentina and even more Mexico are fragile democracies.

From the 1990's onwards, the role of the U.S. in the democratization of Latin America has been more significant than in the past. But the real difference from the situation during the Cold War is not the active element in U.S. policies in the region in support of democracy but the fact that Washington is not placing serious obstacles to internal developments in the region that have led leftist parties to power through democratic means in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and even in Venezuela.

It is true that since the end of the Cold War U.S. has been less nervous about political change in Latin America but the old ways have not entirely disappeared. A case in point is Venezuela. U.S. voiced support for those who led a coup d'état against Hugo Chávez in spite that the former colonel had arrived to the presidency through elections. On the other hand, Washington was disappointed when the coup failed but it did not actively support anti Chavez forces at the critical moment. Since then the systematic political clashes between George W. Bush administration and the government of Venezuela has been a war of words full of pyrotechnics but nothing else. Up to now, the oil connection between both countries remain intact and both want to preserve it above their ideological differences.

2 Two case studies: Chile and Mexico

Two cases in the geographical extremes of Latin America –Mexico and Chile- can help to illustrate in more concrete and historical terms the role of “the American factor” vis a vis other elements in the process of democratization of the region at the end of the 20th century.

2.1 Chile

Chile was inaugurated as an independent republic at the same time as Mexico, in 1821. This remote outpost of the Spanish empire was not an important silver and gold precious metal producer as Peru or Mexico neither its Indian population was a reliable source of labor as it was in other parts of the empire. In fact, Chile was an agrarian society scarcely populated that was not even self sufficient and the Spanish Crown had to subsidized its administration.

After independence, a very highly structured society dominated by a landed oligarchy and with very few contacts with the outside world, began to change through foreign immigration and investment –mainly British-, industrial mining and agricultural exports. Politics was the domain of the oligarchy. Efforts to secularize the state divided the ruling class but Chile did not experience systematic civil war as was the case of Mexico nor foreign invasions. Quite the contrary, the so called War of the Pacific of 1879-1883

against Bolivia and Peru –a dispute over saltpeter mines- was a great success and give Chile a brief civil war but a great economic bust, national confidence and a strong army⁴.

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At the beginning of the 20th century an oligarchy that was based not only in latifundios but also in commerce and banking remained in control of politics. Politics were already democratic but elitist. The emergence of a working class (mainly in the mining industry) posed the problem to conservative classes of the emergence of leftist parties and the problem to resist or incorporate working and middle classes to the political system.

During the Cold War, communist and socialist were able to mount a real challenge to rightist parties and bested interests specially after the creation of the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) that was able to elect a Marxist, Salvador Allende, as president in 1970 although with only a relative majority. Allende began a program of nationalization of copper mining industry and agrarian reform. The right began to think seriously in the overthrow of the government. It was at this point that the influence of the U.S. began to be felt and not in favor of democracy⁵.

The intervention of the U.S. in the internal affairs of Chile and against the left started very early but at the beginning of the 1970's became crucial. Washington did not organize the military coup of September 1973 that ended with the dead of Allende and the destruction of Chile's democracy but it gave open support to conservative governments in the 60's and in a covert way to anti Allende forces before and after the 1970 elections and encouraged the military –a very professional and successful army that unlike others in Latin American had no history of direct political involvement- to take action against a Marxist government (Uribe, 1975).

As Heraldo Muñoz stated:

U.S. economic interests in Chile [in the 60's and 70's] were of secondary importance compared with the perceived danger of a successful experience of a peaceful transition to socialism in the hemisphere. Also, the demonstration effects for countries like France and Italy, with strong Socialist parties and emerging Ercommunism, were judged to be extremely negative...The mere existence of the Allende government was the determining factor behind the U.S. effort to destabilize the constitutional regime (Muñoz, 1991: 164).

Augusto Pinochet's, the commander of the army became president and his

⁴ For a revision on the Chilean 19th Century, see Simon Collier and William F. Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994*, 1996, chapters 1-7; and Paul W. Drake, "Historical Setting", in *Chile: A Country Study*, Rew A. Hudson (ed.), 1994, chapter 1; A. Curtis Wilgus and Raul D'Eça, *Latin American History. A summary of Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Events from 1492 to the Present*, 1964, 264-280.

⁵ On the political and social structure in 20th Chile before the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, see Joan E. Garcés "Chile 1971: a Revolutionary Government within a Welfare State", in *Allende's Chile*, Kenneth Medhurst, 1972; the section "The Prospect of Chilean Democracy", in *Latin American Politics. 24 Studies of the Contemporary Scene*, Robert D. Tomasek (ed.), 1966, 382-412; Sunkel, Osvaldo "Change and Frustration in Chile", in *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, Claudio Veliz, 1967, 91-115; Daniel Goldrich, Raymond B. Pratt, and C. R. Schulle, "The Political Integration of Lower-Class Urban Settlements in Chile and Peru", in *Masses in Latin America*, Irwing Louis Horowitz (ed.), 1970, 175-214.

dictatorship was openly supported by Nixon's administration in spite of its well known brutality that eventually took the life of 20.000 Chileans. In the Chilean case, the contradictions between U.S. political democratic ideology and the "realistic" school of thought that dominated Washington became crystal clear but they had no effect in practical terms until the Carter administration.

When president Carter began to use human rights as a tool of the Cold War the contradictions of U.S.—Chileans relations became unsustainable-. As a result, there were diplomatic frictions between Washington and Pinochet's regime and one of its effect was the moderation of military repression in Chile. With the coming of Reagan's administration there was a regression. The acceptance by Washington of the so called "Kirkpatrick Doctrine" of supporting authoritarianism as an alternative to Marxist regimes, Carter's sanctions and pressures against Pinochet were lifted but not the arms embargo⁶.

Chile's collaboration with the U.S. in world affairs and its economic success were used by conservatives in the U.S. to keep support of the regime. But there was in Congress and in the American liberal sector systematic criticism of Pinochet's brutal methods of repression, specially after the murder in Washington itself of Orlando Letelier, a political opponent of the Chilean dictatorship, and his American secretary. By 1984 Reagan's administration began to view the support of Pinochet as extremely inconsistent with its support of the so called democratic opposition to leftist Nicaragua and Central American. In these circumstances, Washington decided to openly support the idea of a plebiscite in 1988 as a way to decide if Pinochet should remain in power. When the dictator lost and was forced to call for elections in 1990 Washington was relieved of an ally that had become a liability after U.S. had overcome the left in Central America and won the Cold War in the name of democracy.

The return of democracy in Chile in 1990 was of a limited nature because, before leaving power, Pinochet made himself a permanent member of the Senate and the Chilean army was given a special status as overseer of Chile's "democracy". It took time and the temporary arrest of Pinochet in London as a result of a Spanish judge request to trigger an international and internal reaction that forced Chile's government and judiciary to start a process against Pinochet and other military accused of human right violations. Finally the constitution was amended and full democracy returned to Chile.

One can take as valid for Latin America as a whole Heraldo Muñoz' conclusion to the Chilean dramatic journey from conservative democracy to dictatorship back to democracy and even to have had two socialists as presidents in a row since the year 2000:

The historical record of U.S. policy and democracy in Chile shows an obsessive

⁶ For an analysis of U.S. policies toward Chile during the Pinochet years see in addition to the excellent chapter of Heraldo Munoz already quoted, Paul E. Sigmond *The United States and Democracy in Chile*, 1993.

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tendency to halt the ascendancy of the left in Chile at the cost of eroding Chilean democracy, even to the point of destabilizing the constitutional Allende government and contributing to its overthrow... The United States has backed military coups and maintained cordial relations with authoritarian regimes. But, inevitably, public opinion and Congress pressure the White House to criticize violations of human rights and to recommend gradual openings of the political systems of dictatorial regimes (Muñoz, 1991: 172)

It is possible to change in the former quotation the name of Chile and replace it with that of some other Latin American country and add some local element and the conclusion would be the same.

2.2 México

Shortly after independence, in 1824, Mexico adopted a federalist, republican and democratic constitutional framework. However, lack of communications, powerful local interests and inter elite conflict, clashes between church and state, brutal social and ethnic cleavages, dysfunctional institutions, two invasion by foreign powers –the U.S. and France–, the humiliation as a result of the loss of half of national territory and economic stagnation, made political democracy an impossibility. For half a century Mexico was a failed national state that just fought for survival.

It was only after the defeat of French imperial design in 1867 that Mexico was more or less able to create the minimum conditions for stability and order to aloud a functioning national state. From that date until 1911 the presidency was in the hands of two strongmen: Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz. In such conditions, elections were empty political shells, a ritual devoid of content. The real source of legitimacy of a paternalistic dictatorship in a liberal and oligarchic system was the capacity of the presidency and its bureaucracy to maintain stability by constant negotiation with local elites and the reintroduction of economic growth mainly through foreign investment.

After a period of economic growth, the Mexican Revolution started in 1910 as a demand for political democracy but very soon evolved into a real social revolution. The new regime transformed Mexican society trough agrarian reform, support of labor demands, diminishing the power of the catholic church and intense nationalism (oil, land and railroads were nationalized) (Gilly, 2005).

In political terms, the new regime was the modernization of authoritarianism. Simplifying, at the core of the new system was again a strong presidency but this time limited by the no reelection principle and supported by a state party created in 1929 (PNR, transformed into PRM in 1938 and PRI since 1946) at the bases of which was a new army, a massive peasant organization (CNC), a series of powerful labor unions plus some middle class organizations. Only big business remained outside the official party but in time the government created a series of trade and industrial federations that were used to negotiate and control the private sector almost in the same way that peasant, workers and middle class were (Córdova, 2006).

Post revolutionary Mexico was a populist and corporatist political system that conducted uninterrupted elections at the municipal, state and national level since a new democratic constitution was inaugurated in 1917. At some moments, and basically as a result of intra elite fight, the opposition used election time to challenge the group in power but every attempt was defeated through a mixture of open and even brutal repression and cooptation (Aguilar Camín, Meyer, 1993).

In such a political system elections had no content but were not entirely useless; they helped to keep a façade of democracy vis à vis the outside world and were also functional to maintain a system of constant negotiation within the political elite circles –that was the real political process always dominated by the presidency- and introduced from time to time new blood into the ruling class. Circulation of elites was no problem in Mexico and it was, together with a lack of real ideology, one of the secrets of the longevity of the system.

From the beginning of the Mexican Revolution until 1927 the conflict with the United States was systematic (See Vázquez, Meyer, 1985). Twice U.S. military forces temporarily occupied some parts of Mexico (1914 and 1916) and the possibility of an open intervention pended always upon the head of the revolutionary leadership. However, after a crisis motivated by a modification of the oil law that affected American and European interests the American ambassador and the Mexican president reached an informal agreement that ended the confrontation and instituted an unwritten agreement that is still the cornerstone of U.S.-Mexican relations: as long as the Mexican government was able to keep stability along the common border with the U.S. and did not challenge directly U.S. interests in Mexico or in the international system, Washington did not interfere in the internal affairs of Mexico nor question the legitimacy of the Mexican government⁷.

The Mexican authoritarian political system was one of the most successful of its kind in the 20th century and after the 1920's Mexico was the most stable Latin American country. The national interest of the U.S. was very well served in the Mexican case by this stability, that is why after open electoral frauds such as those of 1940, 1952 or 1988, Washington just looked the other way and never questioned the nature of such elections, as it did not question the nature of the regime after the student massacres of 1968 or 1971, nor the “dirty war” that Mexican security forces carried on against urban and rural guerrillas during the 1970's⁸.

In order not to destroy one of the key elements of legitimacy of the authoritarian system –nationalism- Washington did not punish Mexico for not voting with the U.S. against Cuba within the Organization of American States in the 1960's and helped financially the Mexican government after

⁷ The essence of the agreement between ambassador Dwight Morrow and president Plutarco Elías Calles is in, *The Mexican revolution and the Anglo-American powers : the end of confrontation and the beginning of negotiation*, Lorenzo Meyer, 1985.

⁸ On the nature of Mexican government repression against dissidents see Carlos Montemayor *Guerra en el paraíso*, 1991.

Finally, Mexico transformed its authoritarian system when PRI conceded defeat in the presidential election of year 2000. The transformation was mainly the product of the effort of opposition parties –PAN from the right and PRD from the left- and the regimen loss of legitimacy as a result of a systematic failure of the economy after 1982. Support for democracy came in the 1990's from an international environment that finally was willing to call by its name Mexico's authoritarianism. International media, observers and NGOs were important but not crucial in inhibiting the most radical elements of the government from using illegal methods to reverse electoral results in 2000 and gave Mexico, for the first time in history, the opportunity to live the experience of a peaceful transfer of power through a real electoral competition.

In conclusion, it was the evolution of Mexican society combined with an international atmosphere free of Cold War fears that encouraging the idea of democracy as the only legitimate bases of power and the only viable way of conducting power competition, what ended one of the most moderate and most enduring authoritarian systems in contemporary world. The U.S. role in maintaining for such a long time a non democratic regime in Mexico was Washington's willingness since 1927 to label it a democracy in a quid pro quo for stability in its southern border. U.S. role in dismantling Mexican authoritarianism was mainly indirect: not interfering with its dismissal.

3. Epilogue

In recent times, it seems that the more active elements within the U.S. in promoting democracy in Latin America are not in the White House or in other governmental agencies but in civil society. Non governmental organizations and some multinational institutions are among the most prominent American actors helping Latin America to overcome its long history of political, social and cultural authoritarianism (Issacs, 2000: 264-265).

If democracy is finally consolidated in Latin America –a big if in several countries- the main reason will be the result of a transformation in the nature of its people that allowed the transition of whole society from subjects to citizens. Nevertheless, the changes in the international environment are helping in this process. Democracy and respect for human rights are now a source of legitimacy of big powers policies and attitudes towards Third World countries. It is attitudes rather than policies of the dominant power in Latin America what is now helping the region in its efforts to try democracy as its dominant political and moral system.

Nevertheless, a cautionary note is needed: democracy in the Latin America is still a possibility rather than a well rooted system of life and belief. It is a

⁹ The thesis that Mexico had a dispensation from Washington to dissent in things that were important but not crucial to United States is developed in Mario Ojeda *Alcances y límites de la política exterior de México*, 1984.

fragile political evolution: economic failures, social upheavals, catastrophic natural events or a change in the international environment may derail the present democratic development in that part of the world. Democracy has to combine political freedoms with social improvements. Political equality not rooted in a more egalitarian distribution of wealth could not withstand the pressures of an economic or political crisis. Venezuela can be viewed as a case where the popular demand for social justice could lead to a non democratic development and a new wave of turmoil in the region.

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