

Peace and Justice Tide In an Ocean of War

by Rob Ham

US forces used military might in Latin America 86 times over the past 150 years to establish economic dominance of the region. But there can be no peace without economic and social justice. The day is finally dawning when indigenous and working people are asserting themselves all over the lands south of the US to create another America where peace and justice can reign. Peasant and worker movements are springing up across the continent and, in some cases, gaining real power.

In 2001, Argentina reached her saturation point with stifling International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates. After the government froze all the nation's assets and cut the people off from their own money to avoid complete financial collapse under the burden of foreign debt, the people took to the streets. The government was forced to resign. The replacement government officially defaulted on the nation's debt and the IMF was expelled. The road is a rocky one but Argentina is on her way to recovery and self-sufficiency.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, elected by popular vote then reinstated to office by popular outcry after an abortive, US-inspired coup attempt, indicted President Bush from the rostrum of the UN general assembly on September, 20 2006. To significant applause by the representatives of a wide variety of nations, Chavez called President Bush "The Devil" and accused him of having global imperial ambitions.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales was elected President. He is the first indigenous person ever to attain that office in that nation. Morales has embarked on a campaign to nationalize Bolivia's natural gas industry and keep the profits at home in order to help alleviate that nation's crushing poverty.

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Confessions of an American Devil

General Smedley Darlington Butler served in the United States Marine Corps for thirty-three years during the golden years of US "Gunboat Diplomacy," but after his retirement, he became a devoted foe of imperialism.

In 1912 Butler led an expeditionary force that landed in the Nicaraguan port city of Corinto. His mission was to crush the Nicaraguan Liberal Party's attempt to regain the nation's sovereignty signed away by the Adolfo Diaz government in the Knox-Castrillo treaty.

In 1917, as the US appointed chief of the Haitian Gendarmerie, Butler's troops forced the adoption of a US friendly constitution at bayonet point, which would effectively surrender control of all Haitian economic activity to the US. When Haitian lawmakers balked, Butler ordered the assembly dissolved.

After discharge from the Marines in 1931, Butler seemed to have a change of heart and became an outspoken critic of US imperialistic activities. He spoke to pacifist, labor and other leftist groups around the country. One of his most often quoted statements was printed in *Common Sense* magazine and reads "In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism."

General Butler died in June of 1940.



Evo Morales and Ecuadorian Schuar protesting FTAA.

photo: Jim Tarbell

In Brazil, the landless peasant movement, or MST is the largest social movement in Latin America. With 1.5 million members, the MST campaigns for agricultural reform in a nation where 3% of the population owns two thirds of the arable land.

MST promotes peasant ownership and redistribution of land as well as education and food security for the poor. Through peaceful occupation of unused land and establishment of cooperative farms, the MST has met with significant success. The MST also has established schools and clinics and has promoted construction of housing for the poor.

To bring light to an area so long shrouded in darkness is no easy task. Confronting the imperial war machine is dangerous work. Entrenched oligarchies and moneyed interests, who have been the traditional American allies in the region, fight tooth and nail to stop advancement of any agenda that empowers the poor at the expense of the privilege of the rich.

In Brazil, violence against the landless and forest workers is a tradition. The various governments of Brazil turn a blind eye when they are not actively assisting the corporate elements that perpetrate these outrages. Two MST leaders were gunned down in an encampment in northwestern Brazil in August and the killers are still at large. The violence stems from a confrontation between the squatter families and COPERGAS, which has stated an intention to build a natural gas pipeline through the area. The only action taken by police was to arrest MST National Coordinator Jaime Amorim for "Bad Behavior" at a 2005 anti-war march.

The US government pours money into Venezuela to help anti-Chavez groups. In Bolivia, racial hatreds are stirred as the middle and upper-middle class of predominantly white Bolivians accuse the government of racial bias as the government tries to level the playing field for the long oppressed majority of the country.

However, as the strains of empire weaken US dominance worldwide, grassroots movements seem to be flourishing. People are waking up and looking to take back what has been built on their backs and demanding a share of what is theirs by right.

Rob Ham began researching American Empire after his service in the military and is now student at New College of California.