

INSS



INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL
STRATEGIC STUDIES

EVENT REPORT

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Center for Strategic Research

INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar

“Working with Latin American Security Forces: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future”

Dr. Richard Millett, Vice President and Director of the St. Louis Committee on Foreign Relations and former Professor at Southern Illinois University

October 11, 2011

By Eva Silkwood Baker, CSR Western Hemisphere Team

On September 9, Senior Research Fellow COL John (Jay) Cope hosted an INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar featuring Dr. Richard (Dick) Millett, a distinguished historian who retired after 33 years of teaching at Southern Illinois University. Dr. Millett is the author of numerous books and articles on the armed forces in Latin America, including *Searching for Stability: The U.S. Development of Constabulary Forces in Latin America and the Philippines* (Combat Studies Institute Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: 2010). For this seminar, Dr. Millett drew from the concluding chapter of his most recent book, stressing basic principles and specific lessons he has drawn from past U.S. experiences in the Americas which can be applied to contemporary and future engagements.

To place his topic in historical perspective, Dr. Millett first discussed how U.S. objectives changed during the 20th century affecting the role required of its armed forces in support of foreign policy. The U.S. military approach evolved from creating and training many Latin American security forces, such as the military and police establishments in Cuba and Panama, to armed interventions in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, to technical and operational support for armed forces fighting Communist guerrillas in Central America. Today, U.S. defense forces assist

security counterparts to combat transnational organized crime in Colombia, Mexico, and several Central American and Caribbean states. He argued that it is instructive to assess our long historical experience, the recent evolution of U.S. military assistance efforts after the Cold War and 9/11, and the accumulated strengths and limitations of providing support to Latin American and Caribbean security forces.

Dr. Millett underscored the importance of understanding the security mindset of Latin American states and how it has evolved from external defenses (the fight for independence from colonial powers and to solidify borders in the 19th century) to internal security during the 20th century (the succession of domestic threats from political subversion, communist insurgency, and narco-terrorism). In the 21st century, their focus is now on multidimensional and transnational threats in which the scope of security demands cannot be easily compartmentalized. Governments must regain control of ungoverned space and face non-traditional threats that can undermine the state. Dr. Millett prefers the concept of a “challenged state” to “ungoverned space” since government, in the broadest political interpretation of the word, always exists within a territory in some capacity, even if it is not the official government entities of the nation-state.

Over time, U.S. objectives in assisting Latin America and the Caribbean have included a desire to reform national security forces, strengthen the armed forces, overcome internal threats through anti-subversion and counterinsurgency operations, enhance regional coordination and cooperation, counter threats from non-state actors, and maintain civilian control and the primacy of the rule of law within security institutions. Dr. Millett identified U.S. strengths in these endeavors as utilizing its own modern, sophisticated and professional military to engage in technical training and material assistance to Latin American security forces, enhancing their air and sea capabilities, promoting civilian leadership over the military, and inculcating a culture of respecting human rights.

He also noted several drawbacks in the effectiveness of these efforts, including U.S. cultural ignorance and prejudices in dealing with other societies plus Latin American and Caribbean acrimony and suspicions due to past experiences with the United States. Complicating matters, Washington's policies toward the region have been shaped by domestic political forces (the on-going immigration debate, for example) and the hemisphere's historically low strategic priority.

Dr. Millett observed that the United States does not have constabulary forces in which police and military functions overlap due to the *posse committatus* law. This makes it difficult to transfer our experience to the Latin American region where the functions do overlap in many countries. Finally, Washington has not discarded its 20th century chauvinistic "assistance mindset" that stresses the region's need to rely on U.S. know-how. This approach to Inter-American relations precludes mutual respect and the sharing of experiences. Today, the United States can learn valuable lessons in security sector reform from its Western Hemisphere partners. Two recent examples include Brazil's military peacekeeping success in Haiti and Colombia's counterinsurgency experience.

In the contemporary complex security environment dominated by transnational organized crime, policymakers throughout the Americas would be wise to remember that regional

cooperation is essential if countries wish to mitigate shared threats. No security challenge is solely national. The real imperative is for states to work together.

Dr. Millett pointed out what he calls the "reverse domino effect" if countries do not work together. The effect occurs when strength in combating crimes, such as drug trafficking and gang violence, in one country reveals weakness in its neighbors. In other words, without collaboration the less one country is affected, the more likely its neighbors will be affected. This is another way of looking at the "balloon effect" in narcotics trafficking patterns which have shifted several times over the past three decades.

In the contemporary battle against transnational organized crime, Dr. Millett offered the following guidelines for U.S. and Latin American security forces in their efforts to collaborate more effectively.

Basic Principles:

1. **Clarity of purpose** is essential to ensure a force can accomplish its mission. The entity's relations with other elements of government, such as the courts and the rest of the judicial system, must be clearly understood.
2. **Unity of effort** among civilian and military personnel is needed to avoid policy confusion and possible human rights violations.
3. **Goals must be realistic** and be primarily shaped by domestic context rather than foreign influence in order to maintain credibility and avoid becoming an object of nationalist attacks as a tool of external domination.
4. **Knowledge and acceptance of the limits of outside influence** is vital to achieving an effective security force trusted by the native population.

Specific Lessons:

1. Resources are always inadequate; there is never enough time to do the job the way it should be done. Resources are always limited, newer problems always divert attention, political and popular support is a limited and diminishing resource. Arguing for more time, more resources can become a self-defeating exercise, diminishing credibility and diverting attention from determining urgent priorities. Even though the task is never done, this is not an excuse for not beginning to make progress now.

2. Technology transfers, values do not. It is relatively easy to train someone how to use a weapon; it is much more difficult to control when they use the weapon and against whom. The U.S. is very good at technical training and it is easy to measure success in such terms. But the political results of such training depend on the when and against whom aspects.

3. You are dealing with adults whose values are already well formed and largely immutable and whose actions are governed by their cultural and political realities, not your strategic imperatives. They know their political and social environment better than you and they know what it takes to survive and prosper in it. Any aspect of training which runs contrary to this will have little if any impact. If an alteration in traditional patterns is perceived as advancing their goals, it may be accepted and incorporated, but if it is perceived as largely advancing your goals or if it runs contrary to their cultural values, it will be rejected.

4. Using the military in the role of the police is always a bad idea, although not using them in such a role may be even worse. The U.S. tradition of the military having a minimum role in internal security abuts against the Latin American practice of the armed forces doing more in matters of civil defense. The increased role of Latin American security forces in public security challenges is not necessarily a bad thing – in fact, it can be a good

thing – even though this concept seems counterintuitive to U.S. laws and customs.

5. Positive human relations are important if the general population is to trust state security forces. In nations with only a constabulary force, it is the police units that will have most contact with the population and will determine popular attitudes towards the institution as a whole. When corrupt, brutal and/or repressive they often generate violent resistance to authority. But for political stability and for countering an existing insurgency, relationships with local populations are key.

6. Efforts to change a society largely through changing its security forces never produce the desired effect and inevitably bring undesired effects. The most extreme case of this is when security forces are modernized, but the overall administration of justice is not. Therefore, it is important to simultaneously reform the justice institutions (including courts and prisons) and address endemic corruption and intimidation issues among the populace and public figures. In other words, partial solutions never resolve issues and you will not make much of a difference unless everything is done in a holistic manner.

7. Prejudices and stereotypes always hinder effective force development. They are never a secret from those who are being trained and can have significant, negative long-range results. Taking into account cultural and educational differences does not equate with abandoning standards. Differences do not imply inferiority.

8. Language skills and their cultural context are vital. This does not simply mean achieving a certain degree of fluency, being able to give training lectures and conduct drills. It means learning the values that a language carries. It means knowing that in Spanish there is no good translation for rule of law, that in most indigenous languages our concepts of justice and of the state protecting citizens' rights are largely absent. Language shapes relationships with authority, values and attitudes,

loyalties and expectations. What you think you are saying and what they hear are never exactly the same and sometimes the differences can be critical.

9. Communications between those making policies in Washington and those assigned to carry them out in the field always cause problems. With modern communications, directives from Washington arrive with the speed of light; however, responses from those in the field often seem to travel with the speed of a turtle. Thus, different visions of reality are likely to occur.

10. An ability to learn from the past is always essential, even if perilous. Past experiences cannot be replicated. What works in one situation may not work at all in another context. We usually learn more from mistakes than from successes. History rarely teaches us what will work, but it can demonstrate what does not and can put us on our guard against the inevitable tide of unintended consequences.

###

Ms. Eva Silkwood Baker is a Research Assistant with the Western Hemisphere Team at the Center for Strategic Research at National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. She may be contacted at (202) 685-2229 or eva.baker@ndu.edu. The views expressed are her own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.