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The Good, the Bad, and the Benevolent Interventionist:
U.S. Press and Intellectual Distortions of the Latin American Left

by Kevin Young

U.S. journalists and commentators have helped popularize the image of two distinct Latin American lefts: a “bad” left that is politically authoritarian and economically erratic and a “good” left that is democratic and committed to free-market economics. This binary image oversimplifies the Latin American left in three ways: by overstating the contrast between the two alleged camps, by ignoring complex realities within each camp, and by exaggerating the failings of the so-called bad-left governments. The distinction makes sense, however, as a strategy for countering the rise of independent left-leaning governments in Latin America. Binary characterizations of subordinate peoples reflect a common discursive response to popular resistance on the part of imperial interests, and one with many precedents in the history of U.S.–Latin American relations. Widespread U.S. media adherence to the good-left/bad-left thesis is explicable given this context and given the historic and continuing dependence of the press on state and corporate interests.

Keywords: United States, Media, Imperialism, Neoliberalism, Propaganda model

Since 1998 Latin America has witnessed the election of roughly a dozen left-leaning presidents of varying ideological inclinations, who have been propelled into power by grassroots citizens' movements and voters' disillusionment with the neoliberal policies of previous pro-U.S. leaders. Faced with this tide of protest against the United States and U.S.-allied leaders, the U.S. government has naturally tried to limit its loss of control over the hemisphere. One strategy for doing so has involved promoting what it considers the "good," responsible left embodied by governments in Brazil, Uruguay, and elsewhere, while seeking to isolate and undermine the "bad" left in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba. Dividing the "moderate" from the "radical" left has become an explicit focus of U.S. policy in the past decade. State Department officials have publicly emphasized the need to strengthen the bloc of U.S.-friendly governments to act as a "counterweight to governments like those currently in power in Venezuela and Bolivia which pursue policies which do not serve the interests of their people or the region" (U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, quoted in Weisbrot, 2009a). The Bush and Obama administrations have pursued a parallel strategy within bad-left countries themselves, funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to opposition groups under the guise of "democracy promotion."

U.S. intellectuals and press outlets, including many of the more liberal ones, have played a crucial role in popularizing the binary imagery of the Latin American left and in endorsing the U.S. government response to leftist advances in the region. Jorge Castañeda has been the most prominent academic proponent of the good-left/bad-left thesis (2006; Castañeda and Morales, 2008). The *New York Times*, which has often cited Castañeda, has distinguished between those governments that "aggressively push a leftist agenda" and "Brazil's more moderate, leftist approach"; the former "combines economic populism with authoritarianism," while the latter involves "investor-friendly policies" and respect for democratic institutions (Barrionuevo, 2007; Schmidt and Malkin, 2009; see also the July 31, 2006, editorial, citing Castañeda). *Washington Post* reporters have contrasted "the populist, hard-line, nationalistic left that is antagonistic toward the United States" in Venezuela,

Bolivia, Ecuador, and Cuba (Argentina is sometimes included as well) with the “entirely different” and “pragmatic” path of “social-democratic, globalized, and pro-market” governments in Brazil and elsewhere (Booth, 2009; Forero, 2008 [last quote from Castañeda]; on Argentina see Forero, 2012).

Although a systematic quantitative analysis of U.S. press coverage is not the aim of this article, a modest-sized sample suggests that the good-left/bad-left frame is widespread. From 2009 to 2011, the *New York Times* featured 38 news articles that drew a distinction, explicit or strongly implied, between the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez and the governments of Brazilian presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) and Dilma Rousseff; at most 12 articles noted similarities or cooperation between the two governments and/or Brazilian opposition to U.S. policies. The distinction between the two governments usually carried a normative undertone, albeit without using the adjectives *good* and *bad*. The “bad-left” regimes of Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega were also frequently linked to Chávez and contrasted with the Brazilian, Uruguayan, Chilean, and Salvadoran governments: in the same three-year period, 53 percent of full-length *Times* news articles and opinion pieces mentioning Evo Morales associated him with the Venezuelan government; the percentages for Correa and Ortega were 43 and 52, respectively.

Interestingly, the good-left/bad-left frame seems to be less prevalent on the right-wing end of the mainstream media spectrum. Right-wing outlets share the *Times*’s antipathy toward Hugo Chávez but are more likely to criticize the Brazilian government as well. From 2009 to 2011 the *Washington Times* featured only four news articles and two columns that drew a distinction between Venezuelan and Brazilian government policies. The paper was much more likely to emphasize (and condemn) cooperation between the two governments: 14 articles, columns, and letters pointed to Brazil’s similarities or cooperation with Venezuela and/or its opposition to U.S. policy. The *Washington Post*, which is relatively liberal on some issues but more right-wing than the *New York Times*, featured a fairly even mix of articles that adhered to the thesis and those that noted similarities or cooperation

between Venezuela and Brazil. Coverage on the relatively liberal National Public Radio and the far-right Fox News Network seems to conform to this pattern (see Table 1).¹

TABLE 1

Prevalence of “Two-Lefts” Distinction in News Reports, 2009–2011

	<i>New York Times</i>	National Public Radio	<i>Washington Post</i>	<i>Washington Times</i>	Fox News ^a
Number distinguishing between Venezuelan and Brazilian policies	38	5	18	4	4
Number noting similarities/cooperation and/or Brazilian opposition to U.S. policy	12	3	14	7	12
Percentage making distinction (first row as percentage of total)	76	63	56	36	25

a. Tally includes all programs, not just news reports (which, in any case, are often highly opinionated).

This article begins with an overview of good-left/bad-left tropes in recent U.S. press coverage of Latin America. It then examines how this discourse distorts reality and closes by offering an explanation for its persistence. The binary imagery of the Latin American left ultimately seems to derive more from imperial and neoliberal objectives and from media subservience to elite interests than from the realities of the Latin American left. Such discourse is more usefully viewed within a longstanding historical tradition of “counter-insurgent prose,” reflecting a common response to popular resistance on the part of empires, elites, and establishment intellectuals (Guha, 1988).

DEMOCRATS AND DICTATORS

The mainstream press's most common point of contrast between good- and bad-left regimes revolves around their levels of respect for democracy and human rights. A report from *New York Times* correspondent Simon Romero (2009) exemplifies the standard narrative:

On the one side are countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where voters have given much greater power to their populist presidents, partly by allowing them to extend their time in office and sometimes eroding the function of Congress and the Supreme Court, institutions portrayed as allies of the old oligarchy. On the other side are nations of varying ideological hues, including Brazil, Latin America's rising power, where resilient institutions have allowed for more diversity of participants in politics, ruling out the so-called participatory democracy that Mr. Chavez, the Venezuelan president, has been eager to promote in the region.

Similarly, the *Washington Post's* Juan Forero (2009) contrasts "democratic Brazil" with the region's "fervently anti-American leaders." While the good-left regimes respect their countries' constitutions and other democratic institutions, bad-left regimes seek to amend those constitutions to extend term limits and increase executive power. While good-left governments respect private media, bad-left governments systematically repress any media criticism of official policy. And while the former allow citizens to protest, the latter employ repression reminiscent of Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler, according to newspaper columnists (e.g., Rowan and Schoen, 2007; cf. Young, 2008).

The aggressive, authoritarian left is embodied by "Venezuela's revolutionary strongman and narcoterrorist Hugo Chavez," "a hectoring strongman" who presides over "a bloated, repressive state" (*Daily News* editorial, November 28, 2009; *Washington Post* editorial, August 17, 2007). According to the standard narrative, Chávez is singlehandedly responsible for the entire region's

leftward shift, just as the Soviet Union and later Cuba were the puppet masters behind all leftist resistance movements during the Cold War; the election of left-leaning leaders has nothing to do with the fact that Latin America is the most unequal region in the world, that it has long been dominated by the United States and domestic oligarchies, and that most Latin Americans disagree with the neoliberal economic policies promoted by Washington. With the help of a few “satellites” whose leaders have renounced “an independent foreign policy” and are now “slavishly aligned to Hugo Chávez”—foremost among them Evo Morales, the “Bolivian dictator-in-the-making”—Chávez has duped tens of millions of people into supporting his agenda. He combines patronage with outright repression, “buying support” among irrational populations who are “largely blind to results,” while silencing Venezuelans who disagree with him (*Washington Post* editorial, November 29, 2009; Richard Feinberg quoted in Rogers, 2011; *Daily News* editorial, November 28, 2009; Diehl, 2005).

One example of Chávez’s cynical regional machinations is his support for ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. According to the *Washington Post* editors (June 30, 2009), the June 2009 military overthrow of Zelaya occurred in part because “the Honduran president had lately fallen under the spell of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez,” who had presumably tricked Zelaya into raising the country’s minimum wage and implementing other measures beneficial to Honduran workers and the poor. News coverage following the coup rarely failed to emphasize Zelaya’s friendly relations with Chávez but usually omitted all discussion of Zelaya’s socioeconomic policies: in just the first two months following the coup, the *Washington Post* mentioned Zelaya’s close relationship to Chávez 13 times and published several pieces that focused primarily on that relationship. The other dominant emphasis in press coverage of Zelaya was his alleged attempt to extend presidential term limits—a disingenuous charge but one that helped to further define the bad left as authoritarian (Young, 2010a).

A key focus of U.S. press attacks on the bad left has been the Venezuelan government’s alleged control over its country’s media. Those attacks increased dramatically after May 2007, when

the government revoked the public broadcasting license of the private station RCTV, which had openly supported a 2002 military coup against Chávez (Young, 2008). A typical report from Simon Romero (2011) gives the impression that most news sources in Venezuela are state-owned: “state bookstores,” “state newspaper[s],” “state television,” and “state radio” all form part of “Venezuela’s expanding state propaganda complex.” Romero and others have directed similar accusations toward governments in Ecuador and Bolivia (e.g., Romero and Caselli, 2011). As detailed below, such reports wildly exaggerate bad-left governments’ degree of control over their countries’ media while also neglecting the state repression of private media in countries aligned with the United States.

Other signs of the repressive authoritarianism of bad-left governments are their drive to militarize their societies and their anti-Semitism. Indignant editors have often railed against Hugo Chávez’s military spending, alleging that Chávez is “arm[ing] to the teeth” not just to repress domestic dissent but also to provoke “a reconstituted Cold War south of the border” (*Investor’s Business Daily* editorial, July 28, 2008; cf. *Washington Post* editorials, January 14, 2005, August 17, 2007, and April 8, 2010). Chávez also promotes modern-day pogroms against Venezuelan Jews, whom he blames for the country’s uneven distribution of wealth and other problems. Neither allegation is honest: Venezuelan military spending has actually declined quite dramatically in recent years and is miniscule compared with that of the United States (SIPRI, 2011: 1–5); the charges of official anti-Semitism were based on selective quotations of Chávez’s public comments and press distortions of events (Stoneman, 2008: 101–103; Wingerter and Delacour, 2009). But again, reality is seldom permitted to interfere with the well-rehearsed dogma, most of which closely echoes U.S. government rhetoric.

RATIONAL FREE-MARKET CENTRISTS AND RADICAL POPULISTS

Much press coverage and intellectual commentary also draws a sharp contrast between the economic policies of the two camps. Hugo Chávez embodies an emphasis on economic nationalism

and social spending at the expense of genuine economic development. His “nationalization of industries” and “profligate state spending” reflect a cynical strategy “to purchase popular support, or quiescence” (Forero, 2010b; *Washington Post* editorial, August 17, 2007). Inflation—the cardinal sin of monetarist and neoliberal economics—has therefore skyrocketed, a sign of the Venezuelan autocrat’s lust for power at the expense of long-term economic health and stability. Meanwhile, “Brazil and Chile represent the opposite of Venezuela,” with Brazil’s Lula leading “Latin America’s new pragmatic left,” “the economically and politically moderate” camp that has “embrace[d] globalization” and sticks to “responsible” and “middle-of-the-road policies” (Sabatini and Marczak, 2010; Forero, 2010a and 2010b). In contrast to the bad left, “governments in Brazil and Chile have adopted investor-friendly policies” (Schmidt and Malkin, 2009). Much of the business press agrees: Brazil “is securing its future in the right way,” say the editors of *Investor’s Business Daily* (November 24, 2009), by “cutting taxes, drilling for oil, paying its bills and living within its means.” One academic variant of this distinction builds upon “resource curse” theories, suggesting that the rise of the bad left ultimately derives from those countries’ abundant subterranean resources and the consequent temptation to pursue unsustainable, rent-led economic development (Weyland, 2009).

“Market economies” and “rationality” are logically inseparable in this discourse. Writing of Bolivia, political scientist Kurt Weyland laments that neoliberal policies are often “economically rational but politically suicidal” because of “furious resistance” from the impassioned herd, which suffers from “deep-seated loss aversion” and extreme paranoia about “greedy foreigners” (2009: 156). Not all is bleak, though: *Washington Post* reporter Juan Forero (2010a) approvingly quotes a representative from a U.S. think tank (Christopher Sabatini) who notes that “voters are more calculating and rational than we give them credit for. . . . People are making the choice to support market economies and rational leaders.” The cause for celebration was the January 2010 election of the right-wing Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, which Forero optimistically interprets as the sign of a “broad regional trend” of “growing preference for free-market centrists.”

The contrasting policy approaches of the good and bad lefts—rational embrace of low inflation and the free market versus knee-jerk nationalism and populist overspending—have naturally produced starkly different results, according to both opinion pieces and news articles: whereas good-left countries have enjoyed both formidable economic growth and reductions in poverty and inequality, Chávez’s “pathological mismanagement has run the economy into the ground” (Pérez-Stable, 2010; cf. Castañeda, 2006: 40; *Miami Herald* editorial, February 8, 2010; Romero, 2010; Young, 2010b). Most reporters, editors, and columnists also downplay or even deny altogether the social gains in Venezuela over the past decade, implying that the only consequences of Chavismo for ordinary Venezuelans have been greater poverty—a trope with many historical precedents in U.S. press depictions of Castro’s Cuba, Sandinista Nicaragua, and other leftist regimes (Johnson, 1980: 241; Young, 2010b: 48). Luckily for all such regimes, however, the easily manipulated masses are “largely blind to results,” as *Washington Post* columnist Jackson Diehl (2005) laments.

Again, this discourse closely echoes that of U.S. government officials. During a March 2010 visit to Brazil, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded that the Venezuelan government “restore private property” and “return to a free market economy.” Clinton contrasted Venezuela with the good left, saying, “We wish Venezuela were looking more to its south and looking at Brazil and looking at Chile” (Clinton, 2010). Recent reports from the U.S. Director of National Intelligence have also warned about “a small group of radical populist governments” that “emphasize economic nationalism at the expense of market-based approaches,” thus “directly clash[ing] with US initiatives” and U.S. vital “interests in the region” (McConnell, 2008: 34; Blair, 2010: 30).

The choice of adjectives in the above descriptions is revealing: the bad left is “radical,” “erratic,” “profligate,” “slavish,” and “pathological,” while the good left is “moderate,” “responsible,” “pragmatic,” “independent,” and “rational.” The bad left is immature and impulsively nationalistic in its approach to economic development, shunning the corporate-led globalization that is synonymous with civilization and progress; the good left eagerly “embraces” the latter concepts,

demonstrating its maturity and capacity for self-governance. This language echoes Castañeda's portrait of a bad left that "is nationalist, strident, and close-minded" versus a good left that is "modern" and "open-minded" (2006: 29). These tropes are deeply rooted in the history of imperial discourse.

THE BENEVOLENT INTERVENTIONIST

The good-left/bad-left thesis may seem more enlightened and progressive than classic racist or imperialist rhetoric in that it does not lump all Latin Americans together, but in fact the clever colonizer has always distinguished between "good" and "bad" members of the subordinate group. When Columbus sailed through the Caribbean in the 1490s, he contrasted the peaceful Arawaks of Cuba to the aggressive, allegedly cannibalistic Caribs to the southeast (Hulme, 1994: 169–171, 190). European and U.S. imperialists, as well as Latin American elites, employed similar discursive strategies over the following centuries.² In the early twentieth century, both the jingoists led by Theodore Roosevelt and the Wilsonian "idealists" contrasted the unruly children of Central America and the Caribbean with the more responsible leaders in the bigger Latin American countries. Woodrow Wilson and his appointees pledged to replace the "naughty children" of Latin America with "good men," whom they would "teach the South American republics to elect" (Schoultz, 1998: 244, 272, 192–197; Kenworthy, 1995: 30; cf. Johnson, 1980: 209, 217; Black, 1988). Later, following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, U.S. policy came to focus on assisting the good Latins while isolating, and often exterminating, the bad; many of the tropes used to characterize Hugo Chávez in the past decade have clear precedents in government and press depictions of Fidel Castro starting four decades earlier (Platt et al., 1987; Johnson, 1980: 113, 241; Landau, 2006; Chomsky, 2008). Similar binary depictions have long characterized Orientalist discourse toward Asian and African peoples, particularly Muslims (Mamdani, 2004).

Historically these distinctions have helped to justify outside intervention in the name of “protecting” the good from the bad, and today the “benevolent interventionist” frame often accompanies the good-left/bad-left frame. Just as Columbus was protecting the peaceful Arawaks from the savage Caribs, the U.S. government promotes democracy through its relations with the good left, protecting those countries from the bad left. By definition, all such interventions are undertaken with noble and humanitarian intent. This paternalistic discourse has remained remarkably consistent throughout the history of imperialism and internal colonialism, albeit with new rhetorical demons and pretexts in each successive epoch: corruption, endemic revolts, and European intervention in Wilson’s day, Communism during the Cold War, and autocrats, populists, terrorists, and drug cartels since the Soviet Union’s collapse. The main demons are typically external to Latin America—often associated with the “Old World,” the Soviet Union, or, more recently, various Asian and Middle Eastern countries—but there are usually internal demons, too (Kenworthy, 1995: 18–37).

Press coverage of right-wing coups against Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez in 2002 and Honduras’s Manuel Zelaya in 2009, and of the U.S. government’s role in and after those coups, offers stark examples of media support (open or tacit) for recent U.S. interventionism. In both cases the U.S. response was accompanied by reports and opinion pieces about legitimate U.S. security concerns and honest regard for democracy. In addition to praising U.S. motives, news reports, opinion pieces, and intellectual commentary often implied that Latin Americans both needed and wanted U.S. intervention.

The 2002 military coup in Venezuela and the U.S. response generally received either praise or ambivalence from leading editorial boards. One survey of editorial responses to the coup found that the *Washington Post*, while harshly critical of Chávez, was among the only leading papers to immediately condemn the coup; the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and others openly welcomed it (Coen, 2002). Many editors and reporters either praised U.S. actions or flatly denied any U.S. role in the coup: the *Times* editors, for example (April 13, 2002), falsely claimed that the coup

“was a purely Venezuelan affair.” Later *Times* news reports continued to ignore evidence of the U.S. role in promoting the coup, for instance by reporting at face value the dubious claims of an Inspector General’s report that the State Department had “sent a consistent message of support for democracy in Venezuela” (quoted in Friel and Falk, 2004: 180).

Liberal media coverage in the wake of the June 2009 military coup in Honduras followed a similar pattern. In the two months following the coup, only 10 percent of the news reports in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* mentioned the coup regime’s killings of protesters (Young, 2010a). Editorial policy at the *Post* offered vocal support for the coup and advocated strong U.S. action to thwart “the faction, led by Mr. Zelaya’s mentor, Hugo Chávez, that is attempting to overthrow democratic institutions across the region.” Chávez, the *Post* editors warned, “dreams of a putsch in Tegucigalpa that would produce another lawless autocracy like his own.” But soon the paper’s editors and columnists began applauding the Obama administration’s response. U.S. participation in the post-coup mediation efforts had “become an opportunity to deal a defeat to the populist authoritarianism that Mr. Chávez and Mr. Zelaya represent,” thereby safeguarding the good, innocent Latins against the threats of decent health care, education, and greater political power. Two weeks after the coup, Obama and Clinton were “on the verge of achieving their own coup in Honduras and advancing American interests with a deftness not seen from Washington in many years.” This last statement at first seems like a surprisingly candid admission that the United States acts upon self-serving motives, but there is in fact no contradiction: within U.S. imperial logic, “American interests” naturally equate to “support[ing] democracy”; *democracy* is whatever the U.S. government supports (*Washington Post* editorials, June 30 and July 9, 2009; Schumacher-Matos, 2009a). The word “empire” appears only in irony quotes, as an example of the hyperbolic rhetoric of paranoid anti-American observers (e.g., Romero, 2011). “Anti-American,” the label applied to those who oppose U.S. policies, is understood as synonymous with “antidemocratic,” and vice versa: U.S. policy is by definition a force for democracy, and one cannot oppose that policy and still qualify as a

democrat (thus, reporters and commentators contrast “democratic Brazil” with the “anti-American” bad left [Forero, 2009]).

Five months later, in November 2009, the United States was virtually the only country in the hemisphere that accepted the legitimacy of the election that brought Honduran rancher Porfirio Lobo to the presidency. The election was held amidst the large-scale and violent repression of dissent (continuing in the present), including a physical assault on opposition presidential candidate Carlos Reyes, who withdrew his candidacy to avoid legitimizing the results (Corcoran, 2010; Young, 2010a). The United States was able to overlook these petty concerns, though, endorsing the election and thus “leading the support for the democratic option,” according to the *Post* editors. Although the editors expressed support for multilateralism in principle, “the lesson of the Honduran crisis is that the United States cannot always pursue such multilateralism and also support democracy” (*Washington Post* editorial, November 29, 2009). The *Post* was hardly the only press outlet to applaud the benevolent motives of the U.S. government: the *New York Times* editors (November 7, 2009), for example, argued that “the Obama administration has worked hard, if somewhat episodically, to try to resolve the political crisis in Honduras.” Consideration of the actual record of U.S. support for the repressive post-coup regimes of Roberto Micheletti and Porfirio Lobo might compel different conclusions (Weisbrot, 2009b; Young, 2010a), but facts are again irrelevant when they conflict with doctrinal precepts.

In addition to tropes distinguishing “good” from “bad,” recent U.S. press portrayals of the Latin American left also draw implicitly upon historical discourses casting Latin Americans as childlike, feminine, irrational, and in need of guidance. According to current reporters and commentators, defiance of the United States is a sign of “political immaturity” from “impetuous and irresponsible” leaders (former Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson, quoted in Brice, 2009; Schumacher-Matos, 2009b). The voters who elect and reelect bad-left politicians do so not for rational reasons or out of ideological agreement but because they are “largely blind to results” and

tend to gravitate toward demagogic strong men—a derogatory depiction with deep historical roots among U.S. policymakers and intellectuals (Diehl, 2005; see also Schoultz, 1998: esp. 341–342; Johnson, 1980; Black, 1988; Pike, 1992; Kenworthy, 1995).

A related undertone of interventionist discourse is the notion that the good Latins both *need* and *desire* imperial intervention. Such discourse has been present since the start of Western imperialism, and persists today. According to the last pope, Benedict XVI (2007), the native peoples of the Americas “were silently longing” for Christianity prior to 1492. The good Latins continue to yearn for guidance, and need the United States to keep “leading the support for the democratic option” (*Washington Post* editorial, November 29, 2009). Citing the Honduran crisis as an example, U.S. intellectuals Christopher Sabatini and Jason Marczak (2010) argue that Latin American countries are “clearly waiting for leadership” from the U.S. government and have been “unengaged in the responsibilities of true partnership.” The term *partnership* is intended in its standard technical sense, as subservience to U.S. dictates; as noted below, Latin American governments of late have exercised a level of leadership and cooperation unprecedented in the region’s modern history, including in response to the Honduran coup. But that leadership has been largely independent of the United States, a fact that automatically disqualifies it from consideration, and it instead becomes irrefutable evidence of irresponsibility and weakness. The solution to Latin America’s problems, argue Sabatini and Marczak, is “steadfast and strong leadership” from the United States (cf. Crandall, 2011). News reports from the past decade have frequently cited similar criticisms of the U.S. government “for neglecting Latin America” (Constable, 2006). Such reports tend to say little about the consequences of U.S. leadership for the people of Latin America throughout the long twentieth century and offer little concrete evidence that Latin American states or their people are eagerly waiting for the United States to take charge. Indeed, *rejecting* U.S. leadership is often a prerequisite to success for political candidates in today’s Latin America. One of the main reasons for the

weakness of right-wing opposition parties in countries like Venezuela and Bolivia is their failure to repudiate U.S. imperialism and the neoliberal economic policies associated with it.

RHETORIC AND REALITY

Although this article cannot offer a systematic comparison of U.S. press rhetoric to the realities of the Latin American left, some brief observations are in order. First, the binary distinction between good and bad lefts does contain some elements of truth. Venezuela's Chávez government has been, along with that of Cuba, the most outspokenly anti-imperialist and has also made significant attempts to break from neoliberal economic doctrine by nationalizing some big business and increasing social spending. The Bolivian government has been more timid but has also taken actions that the Brazilian or Chilean governments have not, for instance significantly increasing corporate taxes. Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have all passed new constitutions with the aim of wresting power from traditional political oligarchies. Good-left governments have been less outspokenly anti-imperialist, have done less to threaten multinational corporations, and have not pursued any large-scale reforms to their countries' political systems. These distinctions derive from a combination of ideological differences and varying political and economic contexts within the countries in question.

But beyond these simple contrasts, the good-left/bad-left dichotomy falters on three fronts: it exaggerates the contrast between the two camps, it obscures important differences within each camp, and it greatly exaggerates the failings of the bad-left countries in the realms of democracy, human rights, and economic performance.

The stark contrast between good- and bad-left regimes ignores strong similarities among the countries involved (French, 2010). Chávez and Morales may have the strongest anti-imperialist rhetoric, but other left governments have frequently joined Venezuela and Bolivia in opposing U.S. imperialism (Montecino, 2006; Cameron, 2009). All such governments have pursued political and

economic integration independent of the United States through organizations such as the Mercado Común del Sur (Common Market of the South—Mercosur), the Unión de Naciones Sudamericanas (Union of South American Nations—UNASUR), the Alianza Bolivariana de los Pueblos de las Américas (Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of the Americas—ALBA), and most recently the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—CELAC). In the midst of crises all have joined together, at least temporarily, to oppose U.S.-favored actors, first in September 2008 when right-wing violence threatened the Morales government, and then following the 2009 military coup in Honduras. The most prominent good-left regime, the Brazilian government of Lula and his successor Dilma Rousseff, has at times openly defied U.S. foreign policy, eliciting predictable charges of authoritarianism from U.S. commentators. In 2003 it joined Argentina, Chile, and the bad left in opposing the U.S.-promoted Free Trade Area of the Americas, contributing to the idea's demise. In 2010 Lula helped conclude a peaceful diplomatic solution wherein Iran would transfer most of its enriched uranium to Turkey, thereby substantially increasing the chances of peace as well as the hostility of editors and columnists who lamented the creeping signs of authoritarianism in hitherto-democratic Brazil (*Investor's Business Daily* editorial, November 24, 2009; *Daily News* editorial, November 28, 2009; *Washington Post* editorial, May 15, 2010; Friedman, 2010). Lula also deviated from his democratic record by openly supporting WikiLeaks when the organization began revealing massive evidence of U.S. war crimes and diplomatic strong-arming. The recognition of Palestinian statehood by most major Latin American countries—including even staunch U.S. allies like García's Peru, Piñera's Chile, and Lobo's Honduras—is a further example of anti-imperialism from countries outside the bad left.

The economic policies of the two camps also have more in common than most commentary suggests. Despite much talk of socialism from both critics and supporters, the bad-left countries are still fundamentally capitalist and even retain many features of neoliberal capitalism. The higher taxes on corporations, new welfare measures, and increased public spending in Evo Morales's Bolivia

reflect “a modest push beyond neoliberal orthodoxies,” but the vast majority of the economy remains in private hands and dependent on extractive industry and low-value-added exports, and there has been no large-scale effort to redistribute wealth and income (Webber, 2011: 228).³ The push beyond neoliberalism in Nicaragua and Ecuador has been more modest still, and not much bolder than in most good-left countries. Venezuela, on the other hand, has gone farther than other bad-left governments in rolling back neoliberalism: it has nationalized many private companies, significantly reduced poverty and inequality, and introduced a degree of participatory democracy through “communal councils,” cooperatives, and other institutions (Ellner, 2010 and 2011). But even there, the level of private ownership suggests that Venezuela is at most a *mixed* economy. Moreover, the economy retains many of capitalism’s undesirable features, including reliance on fossil-fuel extraction and rentier development (as the Bolivian and Ecuadorian economies also do) (Moreno-Brid and Paunovic, 2010: 205). Thus the appropriate distinction with respect to left regimes’ economic policies is not between “socialist” and “middle-of-the-road policies” but among different variants of capitalism. Venezuela has taken the most anticapitalist actions, but even it is a long way from socialism.

At the same time, the partial exception of Venezuela reveals how the good-left/bad-left discourse obscures significant variation *within* each camp. The Chávez government has broken with neoliberalism to a greater degree than the other bad-left regimes. These variations do not simply reflect ideological differences but derive also from differing domestic circumstances and resources in each country (Cameron and Hershberg, 2010). For example, the comparative radicalism of the Chávez government is partly attributable to the government’s relative wealth and the overt hostility of foreign companies and the right that has at times forced Chávez’s hand. In the extremely polarized political context of Venezuela, Chávez has also been forced to express tacit support for radical voices to his left, such as the late street militant Lina Ron. In Bolivia and Ecuador, meanwhile, powerful social movements wield greater influence than in other countries, and in some cases they, rather than

their countries' presidents, have directly compelled nationalizations and other measures (Webber, 2011: 105–110; on similar dynamics in Venezuela see Ellner, 2008: 215, 218, 224). Focusing on the role of caudillo politicians or the varying ideologies of left regimes as the main determinants of policy, as the good-left/bad-left thesis tends to do, misses other causal factors.

To the thesis's charge that bad-left regimes are destroying democracy, opinion polls offer compelling counterpoints—compelling, that is, if one believes that the public's needs and opinions are worthy of consideration. In recent Latinobarómetro polls measuring citizen satisfaction with the state of their democracies, Venezuela has consistently outranked most other Latin American countries; Bolivia's rankings have been more mixed, but it too has consistently ranked in the upper half of the region's countries. U.S. clients have typically fared much worse, as the poll results for countries like Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Honduras attest (those same countries also tend to have the worst human rights records, with Colombia leading the world in murders of trade unionists and second in the number of internally displaced persons, behind the Sudan). The image of the anti-democratic bad left also obscures important differences within that camp. The Chávez government enjoys broader citizen approval by most measures than the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega, whose record is marred by corruption scandals, pacts with the right, and authoritarian behavior within his own party. Interestingly, however, Chávez's Venezuela—the regime most vilified by the U.S. press—tends to fare better than the “softer” of the bad-left regimes (Young, 2011).⁴

Charges that bad-left regimes systematically repress private media are also disingenuous. In the February 2011 *New York Times* report cited above, Simon Romero forgets to tell readers that the vast majority of Venezuelan media sources are still owned by large private interests, most of which are opposed to the Chávez government (Stoneman, 2008: 103–118). As of September 2010, state TV channels accounted for less than 6 percent of audience share (Weisbrot and Ruttenberg, 2010: 4). Romero also forgets that many of Venezuela's valiant private media outlets openly supported a 2002 military coup against the Chávez government. Readers of the report would likewise have no clue that

private and community media that ruffle official feathers in U.S.-allied countries like Colombia often face repression from their governments (Young, 2008). And there is profound irony in the fact that such criticism comes from U.S. press outlets like the *Times*, which have a long record of subservience to the interests of U.S. government and corporate power (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Bennett, 1990; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Friel and Falk, 2004; Kennis, 2010).

The economic record of bad-left regimes also refutes the charge that leaders like Chávez care little about either economic growth or genuine social redistribution. The Venezuelan economy grew by 95 percent from early 2003 to late 2008. The same period saw the rate of poverty decline by over half and extreme poverty decline by 72 percent, in addition to impressive gains in the health care and educational access of the population (Weisbrot, Ray, and Sandoval, 2009: 5–14). Although the economy faltered somewhat over the following year and a half, it faltered in large part because the government followed the austerity doctrine of Western economists when it should have used strong stimulus spending to counter the effects of the global recession—as the Morales government did, leading the entire hemisphere in economic growth in 2009 (Weisbrot and Ray, 2010; Young, 2010b: 46). Evidence to support the depiction of leftist governments as fiscally reckless and unconcerned with inflation “is completely absent from the recent macroeconomic experience of the left-of-center governments” in the region, concluded two UN economists in 2008 (Moreno-Brid and Paunovic, 2010: 199).

All of these considerations seriously undermine the good-left/bad-left thesis. Although there are some significant differences between, say, Venezuela and Brazil, the standard narrative neglects both the commonalities uniting good and bad lefts and the internal differences within each camp. In addition, its criticisms of bad-left governments are disproportionate and many times blatantly false.

IMPERIAL STRATEGY AND MEDIA DEPENDENCE

Explaining the persistence of the good-left/bad-left thesis in U.S. press coverage of Latin America requires attention to U.S. imperial strategy and the political economy of the mainstream news media. The real reasons for the U.S. media's continuing embrace of this simplistic thesis lie not in reality but in the efforts of the U.S. political and corporate empire to stem the decline of its influence in Latin America and in the continued dependence of mainstream news outlets on government and corporate interests. U.S. government and capital have been losing influence in Latin America for some time now, and, as Jorge Castañeda advises, the best imperial strategy for recouping lost influence is to try to "separate" the good from the bad, "to support the former and contain the latter" (2006: 43). Good-left/bad-left discourse and policy represent a logical imperial response, and one with many historical precedents.

The U.S. media's embrace of the good-left/bad-left frame and its corollary, the "benevolent interventionist" frame, is in turn explicable given continued press dependence on government and corporate power. Numerous empirical studies have documented the close correlation between elite views and media coverage for a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues over the past half century (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Bennett, 1990; Mermin, 1999; Kennis, 2010). Media-studies scholars have highlighted a range of mechanisms that contribute to this dependence, among them the reliance of editors and journalists on access to official sources, the ever-more-concentrated structure of media ownership, the importance of advertising revenue, and the shared ideologies of elites, editors, and journalists (Bagdikian, 1983; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Bennett, 1990). Some researchers have argued that these mechanisms are particularly important in shaping U.S. press coverage of foreign policy issues (Bennett, 1990: 106–107, 122; Kennis, 2010: 50–59).

In the case of the good-left/bad-left thesis, two theoretical models help explain press coverage: the propaganda model and the indexing model. Empirical tests of these two models have

consistently reaffirmed their applicability to U.S. press coverage of foreign affairs in general and of Latin America specifically (e.g., Chomsky, 1989; Bennett, 1990; Mermin, 1999; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Rendall, Ward, and Hall, 2009; Corcoran, 2010; Young, 2008 and 2010a; for a “media dependence model” that synthesizes and expands the two models see Kennis, 2010). Such studies have also challenged arguments that emphasize greater media variation and a “less dependably deferential role” of media since the end of the Cold War (Entman, 2004: 3–4).

The propaganda model, first proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), argues that press coverage of foreign affairs systematically favors regimes deemed friendly to U.S. elite interests while reserving most criticism for regimes deemed inimical to those interests. Much of Herman and Chomsky’s quantitative evidence came from case studies of press coverage of U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s, and many subsequent studies have suggested that the propaganda model remains a powerful predictor of the way the mainstream press covers Latin America and U.S. policy in the region. Kennis (2010) finds that Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Puerto Rican social movements and victims that have opposed U.S. policy are far less likely to receive sympathetic coverage than movements and victims that support U.S. policy and U.S.-friendly elites. Other studies of recent news coverage have demonstrated stark contrasts in major news outlets’ treatment of the Colombian and Venezuelan regimes, and of state repression in Honduras following the 2009 coup versus in Iran (Rendall, Ward, and Hall, 2009; Corcoran, 2010; Young, 2008 and 2010a). The good-left/bad-left frame represents an interesting variation on the propaganda model: the category of U.S. “allies” now includes some regimes identified as leftist, but the basic pattern of distinctions remains largely the same.

The indexing model predicts that the range of views expressed in the mainstream press will tend to parallel the range of views within elite circles, especially government circles (Bennett, 1990; Mermin, 1999; cf. Hallin, 1986; Chomsky, 1989). The model helps explain the differences in coverage noted at the outset of this article, which suggest that binary treatment of the Latin American

left is especially apparent at the liberal end of the press spectrum. Most academic and media proponents of the good-left/bad-left thesis are fairly liberal by mainstream standards. Just as the relatively enlightened colonizers have always recognized distinctions among subordinate peoples, so do the relatively liberal politicians and U.S. news outlets of today. Right-wing media and politicians, meanwhile, tend to be more dismissive of even the good left. If there is almost uniform antipathy across the mainstream spectrum toward the bad left, there is less agreement regarding the good-left governments.

CONCLUSION

As left-leaning governments around Latin America have pursued greater political and economic sovereignty, the U.S. government has sought to cut its losses by rewarding relative compliance with U.S. objectives and punishing those who more explicitly defy those objectives. Key to Washington's response has been a distinction, reflected in both discourse and policy, between a "good" left including leaders like Brazil's Lula and a "bad" left led by Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. Although the Bush administration initiated this good-left/bad-left approach, Obama administration officials have embraced and even intensified it (notwithstanding a few well-publicized episodes such as Obama's April 2009 handshake with Hugo Chávez).

Although the distinction between "two Latin American lefts" contains elements of truth, the good-left/bad-left thesis distorts reality in three major ways. First, it exaggerates the degree of separation between the two camps, neglecting the considerable similarities among left governments. At the same time, it belies the complexity and variation within each camp. For example, within the so-called bad left the Venezuelan government has been considerably bolder in its rejection of neoliberalism than the Bolivian, Ecuadorian, and Nicaraguan governments, while social movements in Bolivia and Ecuador have played a more central role than in Venezuela or Nicaragua. In turn, the challenges facing the grassroots left vary significantly from country to country. Finally, proponents

of the thesis tend to overstate the failings of the bad-left governments in the realms of democracy, human rights, and economic performance (though here, too, there is significant variation among these governments).

If the good-left/bad-left thesis falters under empirical scrutiny, it is in some ways a logical discursive response to the increasing assertiveness of governments in the United States' "backyard." The thesis borrows from a well-worn imperial script. Binary characterizations of subordinate peoples are a common discursive response to popular resistance on the part of empires, domestic elites, and loyal intellectuals and have many precedents in the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. The U.S. news media have played a key role in popularizing this binary discourse. The prevalence of the good-left/bad-left frame in recent U.S. press coverage of Latin America supports theoretical models that emphasize media dependence on governmental and corporate interests. Of course, this dependence is not absolute, and the level of dependence often varies from one issue to another (Entman, 2004; Kennis, 2010). But coverage of the Latin American left offers little cause for optimism among those who would like to see the critical and independent press that is essential to a functioning democratic society.

NOTES

1. Based on LexisNexis database searches for reports mentioning both Brazil and Venezuela and for *New York Times* articles mentioning the other bad-left presidents (the latter tally does not include "world briefings" and other brief pieces). The distinctions between Brazil and Venezuela were often quite subtle, but all such articles made at least an implicit distinction, even when discussing similarity of actions: for instance, Barrionuevo (2009) reported that "some countries—including Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua—denounced the plans to allow for increased American troop levels [in Colombia]. *Others*, like Brazil, expressed concern about the agreement" (emphasis added); I have included such examples in both sides

of the tally since they seem to acknowledge similarities as well as differences. The total tally of articles criticizing the bad-left countries would of course be far higher. Space constraints prevent further discussion of the Kirchner governments in Argentina, though they are sometimes lumped in with the bad left (e.g., Castañeda, 2006; Forero, 2012).

2. Many elites and mainstream press outlets within Latin America echo the discourse critiqued here. For example, since the 1980s most Latin American governments have embraced some form of recognition of their countries' non-European cultures. But in most cases this recognition takes the form of a watered-down “neoliberal multiculturalism” that draws a distinction between what Hale (2004) calls *el indio permitido*—the acceptable Indian—and the unacceptable Indian or Other. The acceptable Indian politely asks his or her government for cultural and linguistic recognition, while the unacceptable Indian demands socioeconomic resources and political power in addition to token state recognition of indigenous culture and language. A stark example of how Latin American media reinforce the good-left/bad-left frame itself is the February 2010 issue of the Bolivian magazine *Datos*, the cover of which featured Evo Morales flanked by Lula and Chávez with the headline “The President, between the good and the bad.”
3. Economic policies are obviously not the only measurement of a regime. For example, the Morales government has made important strides in reaffirming indigenous cultures and identities in the context of a deeply racist dominant culture. These dimensions are beyond the scope of this article, however.
4. None of these countries is an ideal democracy, and reasonable observers might raise legitimate concerns about certain actions by the executive branch in each country. My argument here is simply 1) that the picture conveyed in the U.S. media reflects a clear bias

against Washington's more aggressive challengers, and 2) that the U.S. government and press dislike bad-left regimes not for their vices but for their virtues.

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