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Remembering The Past; Repeating It Anyway

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BODY:

ONCE again, the United States finds itself weighing military intervention in the Caribbean, with ships and troops poised just offshore, waiting for an order to move in and restore order to a country that has plunged into chaos and misery. For nearly a century now, that has been the standard American response when events in the region geographically closest to the United States threaten to get out of hand, and for just as long a time, those interventions have almost uniformly failed to produce the results that policy makers in Washington had hoped for.

Since its first sustained foray into the region during the Spanish-American War of 1898, which yielded a protectorate in Cuba, permanent possession of Puerto Rico and a colony in the far-off Philippines, the United States has intervened militarily in the insular Caribbean and in Central America more than a score of times. Some countries, such as the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, have been invaded and occupied more than once, a phenomenon that probably most eloquently expresses America's historic inability to remake neighboring societies to its own satisfaction. Indeed, it has often seemed that the more the United States tinkers, the worse things become.

Many Tactics, One Rationale

The forms of intervention have varied, of course, from quick campaigns such as in Nicaragua in 1912, Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, to long occupations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic early in the century. Then, too, there was invasion by proxy, practiced in Central America in the 1980's, and even the creation of a country by fiat -- Panama in 1903. The locations have also varied, with Spanish-, French- or English-speaking parts of the Caribbean all having to surrender sovereignty and self-determination at one time or another.

Almost always, however, the American rationale has been the same. In 1915, the United States explained that it was occupying Haiti, in the words of the Wilson Administration, in order to eliminate "a public nuisance at

our doorstep." Last week, President Clinton used similar language in describing six American vital interests in Haiti. "First of all, it's in our back yard," he said, before stressing the need to protect Americans living here and his desire to install democracy.

But strategic and commercial considerations, such as control of sugar, bananas and the customs revenues needed to pay back bank loans, have usually loomed behind such statements of high principle. Especially during the early decades of the century, "there was a common strategic thread that pretty much covers all the military interventions, and that was the need to defend the Panama Canal and the approaches thereof," said Ivan Musicant, author of "The Banana Wars," a study of American interventions in the Caribbean Basin between 1898 and 1989. More recently, following the rise of Fidel Castro, the fear of Communist expansion, of "another Cuba," has been paramount.

In at least a material sense, many of the occupied countries benefited from the American presence. Highways, railroads, bridges and streets were built; telephone, electrical and telegraph systems installed or extended; docks, ports and lighthouses modernized, and schools and hospitals constructed in places that had none. Infant mortality rates fell and life expectancy rose as clean water was brought to rural areas and public health campaigns reduced the incidence of tropical diseases such as malaria, yellow fever and yaws.

At the same time, American administrators insisted on balanced budgets and reduced the foreign debt, which helped create conditions for economic growth. The presence of American troops also discouraged the continuing parade of civil wars and coups that had been routine in countries such as Haiti and Nicaragua. "The 19 years that the United States was in Haiti were the 19 best years of Haiti's entire existence," Mr. Musicant asserted. "We left that country a far, far better place than we found it."

But the United States also insisted on creating a professional constabulary to enforce public order, first in Panama and Haiti and later in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. The intention was to create an apolitical force that would guarantee that all parties played by the rules of the game. But those police forces quickly turned into armies, and that, in turn, paved the way for the emergence of despots such as Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, and much later, Generals Omar Torrijos and Manuel Noriega in Panama.

A Need to Return

Obviously, the citizenry of each country had the greatest difficulty in adapting to the system left by the United States when it withdrew. But those decisions have also come back to haunt later generations of American policy makers, and to foster further American involvement in the internal affairs of Caribbean countries. Even now, the United States finds itself in the awkward position of trying to secure the cooperation of Trujillo's protege, Joaquin Balaguer, in preventing leaks in the economic sanctions against Haiti. Mr. Balaguer, who is now 87 and has been nearly blind for more than a decade, keeps getting elected President, most recently two months ago in an election where international observers accused his side of fraud.

And in country after country, the presence and the paternalistic attitude of American troops and military governors, no matter how noble their stated goals, wounded national pride and fomented a nationalist resistance. Augusto Sandino of Nicaragua is the most famous of such resistance leaders, thanks to the young guerrillas who half a century later would come to power invoking his name. Haiti had Charlemagne Peralte and his army of irregulars known as "cacos," while in the Dominican Republic there was Vicente Evangelista and his "gavillero" movement. Both men were hunted down and killed during American occupations, while

civil liberties were suspended and press censorship was in force.

Indeed, resistance was so widespread that the United States developed a corps of experts who moved from one country to another, snuffing out rebellions and imposing imported political structures. The Marine commander Smedley Butler, for instance, led forces in Panama, Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua, and once likened the American role in the region to that of "trustees of a huge estate that belonged to minors." He later repented his actions and in a famous autobiography called himself a "racketeer for capitalism," who "helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street."

Unfortunately, many of those who volunteered for such service had little respect or sympathy for the countries they ruled, did not understand the local language or culture and simply could not fathom the resentment their policies and attitudes, tinged with racism and condescension, generated. Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, once told the Haitian Ambassador in Washington that "the intelligent Haitians should feel gratified that it was the United States, rather than some other power whose motives might not be as unselfish as ours," that had chosen to occupy his country.

Given that legacy, if the United States should decide to invade Haiti again, it will be acting out of character. The last time United States troops landed on the island of Hispaniola, in the Dominican Republic in 1965, a civilian president elected with two-thirds of the popular vote after a long dictatorship, Juan Bosch, had been overthrown in a coup after only seven months in office and had been replaced by a military-dominated government. But when Lyndon Johnson sent in more than 20,000 troops, it was not to restore Mr. Bosch to power; it was to prevent the constitutional president from returning to office after his supporters began a rebellion. If G.I.'s go in this time, they will have the support of the Haitian people, at least initially. But that may not be enough to prevent history from repeating itself.

GRAPHIC: Photos: American election inspectors in Leon, Nicaragua, during the United States occupation between 1926 and 1933. (Times Wide World); United States soldiers holding People's Revolutionary Army suspects during the U.S. invasion in Grenada in 1983. (United Press International) (pg. 1); U.S. troops having their shoes shined in the Dominican Republic, 1965. (United Press International) (pg. 4)

Map: "Call It 'Lake Monroe'" shows a century of U.S. military actions in its Carribean backyard.

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