

Tomgram: Greg Grandin, Why Latin America Didn't Join Washington's Counterterrorism Posse



tomdispatch.com/post/175650/tomgram%3A_greg_grandin,_why_latin_america_didn%27t_join_washington%27s_counterterrorism_posse/

[Note for Readers: *As many of you know, TomDispatch was inaccessible to most computers late last week. We were, it seems, overwhelmed by our own popularity. Too many prospective readers did in TD. We are now hard at work strengthening the site, but this may take a while. In the meantime, we are attempting to post on a somewhat more limited basis, beginning today. Our apologies to all frustrated TD readers! Personally, I couldn't be happier to be back. Tom]*

There was a scarcely noted but classic moment in the Senate hearings on the nomination of John Brennan, the president's counterterrorism "tsar," to become the next CIA director. When Senator Carl Levin pressed him repeatedly on whether waterboarding was torture, he ended [his reply](#) this way: "I have a personal opinion that waterboarding is reprehensible and should not be done. And again, I am not a lawyer, senator, and I can't address that question."

How modern, how twenty-first-century American! How we've evolved since the dark days of Medieval Europe when waterboarding fell into a category known to all as "[the water torture](#)"! Brennan even cited Attorney General Eric Holder as one lawyer who had described waterboarding as "torture," but he himself begged off. According to the man who was deputy executive director of the CIA and director of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center in the years of "enhanced interrogation techniques" and [knew much](#) about them, the only people equipped to recognize torture definitively as "torture" are lawyers. This might be more worrisome, if we weren't a "nation of lawyers" (though it also means that [plummeting](#) law school application rates could, in the future, create a torture-definition crisis).

To look on the positive side, Brennan's position should be seen as a distinct step forward from that of the Justice Department officials under the Bush administration who wrote the infamous "torture memos" and essentially left the definition of "torture" to the future [testimony of the torturer](#). ("[I]f a defendant [interrogator] has a good faith belief that his actions will not result in prolonged mental harm, he lacks the mental state necessary for his actions to constitute torture.")

And keep in mind that Brennan has good company for his position. Recently, the Open Society Institute [published](#) the most comprehensive investigation yet of the offshore system of injustice that George W. Bush and his top officials set up to [kidnap](#) "terror suspects," imprison them without charges or end, and [torture](#) and [abuse](#) them, or "[render](#)" them to other countries willing to do the same. It turns out that 54 nations (other than the U.S.) took part in setting up, aiding, and maintaining this American global gulag. It's a roster of dishonor worth noting: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritania, Morocco, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

Remarkably, according to the Open Society report, just one of those states evidently had a lawyer on hand who could actually recognize torture, even if well after the fact. "Canada," its authors write, "is the only country to issue an apology to an extraordinary rendition victim, Maher Arar, who was extraordinarily rendered to, and tortured in, Syria."

The Latin American Exception

How a Washington Global Torture Gulag Was Turned Into the Only Gulag-Free Zone on Earth

By [Greg Grandin](#)

The map [tells](#) the story. To illustrate a damning new report, “Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detentions and Extraordinary Rendition,” [recently published](#) by the Open Society Institute, the *Washington Post* put together an equally damning graphic: it’s soaked in red, as if with blood, showing that in the years after 9/11, the CIA turned just about the whole world into a gulag archipelago.

Back in the early twentieth century, a similar red-hued map was used to indicate the global reach of the British Empire, on which, it was said, the sun never set. It seems that, between 9/11 and the day George W. Bush left the White House, CIA-brokered torture never saw a sunset either.

All told, of the 190-odd countries on this planet, a staggering 54 participated in various ways in this American torture system, hosting CIA “[black site](#)” prisons, allowing their airspace and airports to be used for secret flights, providing intelligence, kidnapping foreign nationals or their own citizens and handing them over to U.S. agents to be “[rendered](#)” to third-party countries like Egypt and Syria. The hallmark of this network, Open Society writes, has been [torture](#). Its report documents the names of 136 individuals swept up in what it says is an ongoing operation, though its authors make clear that the total number, implicitly far higher, “will remain unknown” because of the “extraordinary level of government secrecy associated with secret detention and extraordinary rendition.”

No region escapes the stain. Not North America, home to the global gulag’s command center. Not Europe, the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. Not even social-democratic Scandinavia. Sweden turned over at least two people to the CIA, who were then rendered to Egypt, where they were subject to electric shocks, among other abuses. No region, that is, except Latin America.

What’s most striking about the *Post*’s map is that no part of its wine-dark horror touches Latin America; that is, not one country in what used to be called Washington’s “backyard” participated in rendition or Washington-directed or supported torture and abuse of “terror suspects.” Not even Colombia, which throughout the last two decades was as close to a U.S.-client state as existed in the area. It’s true that a fleck of red should show up on Cuba, but that would only underscore the point: Teddy Roosevelt took Guantánamo Bay Naval Base for the U.S. in 1903 “in perpetuity.”

Two, Three, Many CIAs

How did Latin America come to be *territorio libre* in this new dystopian world of black sites and midnight flights, the Zion of this militarist [matrix](#) (as fans of the Wachowskis’ movies might put it)? After all, it was in Latin America that an earlier generation of U.S. and U.S.-backed counterinsurgents put into place a prototype of Washington’s twenty-first century Global War on Terror.

Even before the 1959 Cuban Revolution, before Che Guevara urged revolutionaries to create “two, three, many Vietnams,” Washington had already set about establishing two, three, many centralized intelligence agencies in Latin America. As Michael McClintock [shows](#) in his indispensable book *Instruments of Statecraft*, in late 1954, a few months after the CIA’s infamous coup in Guatemala that overthrew a democratically elected government, the National Security Council first recommended strengthening “the internal security forces of friendly foreign countries.”

In the region, this meant three things. First, CIA agents and other U.S. officials set to work “professionalizing” the security forces of individual countries like Guatemala, Colombia, and Uruguay; that is, turning brutal but often clumsy and corrupt local intelligence apparatuses into efficient, “centralized,” still brutal agencies, capable of gathering information, analyzing it, and storing it. Most importantly, they were to coordinate different branches of each country’s security forces -- the police, military, and paramilitary squads -- to act on that information, often lethally and always ruthlessly.

Second, the U.S. greatly expanded the writ of these far more efficient and effective agencies, making it clear that their portfolio included not just national defense but international offense. They were to be the vanguard of a global war for “freedom” and of an anticommunist reign of terror in the hemisphere. Third, our men in Montevideo, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Asunción, La Paz, Lima, Quito, San Salvador, Guatemala City, and Managua were to help

synchronize the workings of individual national security forces.

The result was state terror on a nearly continent-wide scale. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's [Operation Condor](#), which linked together the intelligence services of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile, was the most infamous of Latin America's transnational terror consortiums, reaching out to commit mayhem as far away as [Washington D.C.](#), [Paris](#), and [Rome](#). The U.S. had earlier [helped put in place](#) similar operations elsewhere in the Southern hemisphere, especially in Central America in the 1960s.

By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans had been tortured, killed, disappeared, or imprisoned without trial, thanks in significant part to U.S. organizational skills and support. Latin America was, by then, Washington's backyard gulag. Three of the region's current presidents -- Uruguay's José Mujica, Brazil's Dilma Rousseff, and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega -- were victims of this reign of terror.

When the Cold War ended, human rights groups began the herculean task of dismantling the deeply embedded, continent-wide network of intelligence operatives, secret prisons, and torture techniques -- and of pushing militaries throughout the region out of governments and back into their barracks. In the 1990s, Washington not only didn't stand in the way of this process, but actually lent a hand in depoliticizing Latin America's armed forces. Many believed that, with the Soviet Union dispatched, Washington could now project its power in its own "backyard" through softer means like international trade agreements and other forms of economic leverage. Then 9/11 happened.

"Oh My Goodness"

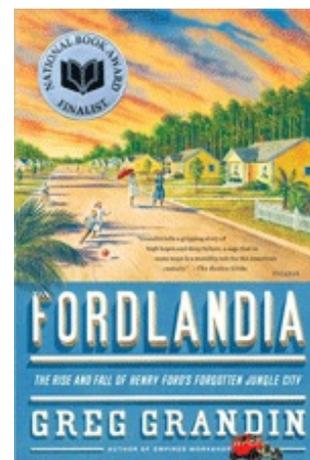
In late November 2002, just as the basic outlines of the CIA's secret detention and [extraordinary rendition](#) programs were coming into shape elsewhere in the world, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld flew 5,000 miles to Santiago, Chile, to attend a hemispheric meeting of defense ministers. "Needless to say," Rumsfeld nonetheless [said](#), "I would not be going all this distance if I did not think this was extremely important." Indeed.

This was after the invasion of Afghanistan but before the invasion of Iraq and Rumsfeld was riding high, as well as dropping the phrase "September 11th" every chance he got. Maybe he didn't know of the special significance that date had in Latin America, but 29 years earlier on the first 9/11, a CIA-backed coup by General Pinochet and his military led to the death of Chile's democratically elected president Salvador Allende. Or did he, in fact, know just what it meant and was that the point? After all, a new global fight for freedom, a proclaimed Global War on Terror, was underway and Rumsfeld had arrived to round up recruits.

There, in Santiago, the city out of which Pinochet had run Operation Condor, Rumsfeld and other Pentagon officials tried to sell what they were [now terming](#) the "integration" of "various specialized capabilities into larger regional capabilities" -- an insipid way of describing the kidnapping, torturing, and death-dealing already underway elsewhere. "Events around the world before and after September 11th suggest the advantages," Rumsfeld [said](#), of nations working together to confront the terror threat.

"Oh my goodness," Rumsfeld [told](#) a Chilean reporter, "the kinds of threats we face are global." Latin America was at peace, he admitted, but he had a warning for its leaders: they shouldn't lull themselves into believing that the continent was safe from the clouds gathering elsewhere. Dangers [exist](#), "old threats, such as drugs, organized crime, illegal arms trafficking, hostage taking, piracy, and money laundering; new threats, such as cyber-crime; and unknown threats, which can emerge without warning."

"These new threats," he added ominously, "must be countered with new capabilities." Thanks to the Open Society report, we can see exactly what Rumsfeld meant by those "new capabilities."



[Buy the book.](#)

A few weeks prior to Rumsfeld's arrival in Santiago, for example, the U.S., acting on false information supplied by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, detained Maher Arar, who holds dual Syrian and Canadian citizenship, at New York's John F. Kennedy airport and then handed him over to a "Special Removal Unit." He was flown first to Jordan, where he was beaten, and then to Syria, a country in a time zone five hours ahead of Chile, where he was turned over to local torturers. On November 18th, when Rumsfeld was giving his noon speech in Santiago, it was five in the afternoon in Arar's "grave-like" cell in a Syrian prison, where he would spend the next year being abused.

Ghairat Baheer was captured in Pakistan about three weeks before Rumsfeld's Chile trip, and thrown into a CIA-run prison in Afghanistan called the Salt Pit. As the secretary of defense praised Latin America's return to the rule of law after the dark days of the Cold War, Baheer may well have been in the middle of one of his torture sessions, "hung naked for hours on end."

Taken a month before Rumsfeld's visit to Santiago, the Saudi national Abd al Rahim al Nashiri was transported to the Salt Pit, after which he was transferred "to another black site in Bangkok, Thailand, where he was waterboarded." After that, he was passed on to Poland, Morocco, Guantánamo, Romania, and back to Guantánamo, where he remains. Along the way, he was subjected to a "mock execution with a power drill as he stood naked and hooded," had U.S. interrogators rack a "semi-automatic handgun close to his head as he sat shackled before them." His interrogators also "threatened to bring in his mother and sexually abuse her in front of him."

Likewise a month before the Santiago meeting, the Yemeni Bashi Nasir Ali Al Marwalah was flown to Camp X-Ray in Cuba, where he remains to this day.

Less than two weeks after Rumsfeld swore that the U.S. and Latin America shared "common values," Mullah Habibullah, an Afghan national, died "after severe mistreatment" in CIA custody at something called the "Bagram Collection Point." A U.S. military investigation "concluded that the use of stress positions and sleep deprivation combined with other mistreatment... caused, or were direct contributing factors in, his death."

Two days after the secretary's Santiago speech, a CIA case officer in the Salt Pit had Gul Rahma stripped naked and chained to a concrete floor without blankets. Rahma froze to death.

And so the Open Society report goes... on and on and on.

Territorio Libre

Rumsfeld left Santiago without firm commitments. Some of the region's militaries were tempted by the supposed opportunities offered by the secretary's vision of fusing crime fighting into an ideological campaign against radical Islam, a unified war in which all was to be subordinated to U.S. command. As political scientist Brian Loveman has [noted](#), around the time of Rumsfeld's Santiago visit, the head of the Argentine army picked up Washington's latest set of themes, insisting that "defense must be treated as an integral matter," without a false divide separating internal and external security.

But history was not on Rumsfeld's side. His trip to Santiago coincided with Argentina's epic financial meltdown, among the worst in recorded history. It signaled a broader collapse of the economic model -- think of it as Reaganism on steroids -- that Washington had been promoting in Latin America since the late Cold War years. Soon, a new generation of leftists would be in power across much of the continent, committed to the idea of national sovereignty and limiting Washington's influence in the region in a way that their predecessors hadn't been.

Hugo Chávez was already president of Venezuela. Just a month before Rumsfeld's Santiago trip, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidency of Brazil. A few months later, in early 2003, Argentines elected Néstor Kirchner, who shortly thereafter ended his country's joint military exercises with the U.S. In the years that followed, the U.S. experienced one setback after another. In 2008, for instance, Ecuador [evicted](#) the U.S. military from Manta Air Base.

In that same period, the Bush administration's rush to invade Iraq, an act most Latin American countries opposed, helped squander whatever was left of the post-9/11 goodwill the U.S. had in the region. Iraq seemed to confirm the worst suspicions of the continent's new leaders: that what Rumsfeld was trying to peddle as an international "peacekeeping" force would be little more than a bid to use Latin American soldiers as [Gurkhas](#) in a revived unilateral imperial war.

Brazil's "Smokescreen"

Diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks show the degree to which Brazil rebuffed efforts to paint the region red on Washington's new global gulag map.

A [May 2005 U.S. State Department cable](#), for instance, reveals that Lula's government refused "multiple requests" by Washington to take in released Guantánamo prisoners, particularly a group of about 15 Uighurs the U.S. had been holding since 2002, who could not be sent back to China.

"[Brazil's] position regarding this issue has not changed since 2003 and will likely not change in the foreseeable future," the cable said. It went on to report that Lula's government considered the whole system Washington had set up at Guantánamo (and around the world) to be a mockery of international law. "All attempts to discuss this issue" with Brazilian officials, the cable concluded, "were flatly refused or accepted begrudgingly."

In addition, Brazil refused to cooperate with the Bush administration's efforts to create a Western Hemisphere-wide version of [the Patriot Act](#). It stonewalled, for example, about [agreeing to revise](#) its legal code in a way that would lower the standard of evidence needed to prove conspiracy, while widening the definition of what criminal conspiracy entailed.

Lula stalled for years on the initiative, but it seems that the State Department didn't realize he was doing so until April 2008, when one of its diplomats wrote a memo calling Brazil's supposed interest in reforming its legal code to suit Washington a "smokescreen." The Brazilian government, another Wikileaked cable [complained](#), was afraid that a more expansive definition of terrorism would be used to target "members of what they consider to be legitimate social movements fighting for a more just society." Apparently, there was no way to "write an anti-terrorism legislation that excludes the actions" of Lula's left-wing social base.

One U.S. diplomat [complained](#) that this "mindset" -- that is, a mindset that actually valued civil liberties -- "presents serious challenges to our efforts to enhance counterterrorism cooperation or promote passage of anti-terrorism legislation." In addition, the Brazilian government worried that the legislation would be used to go after Arab-Brazilians, of which there are many. One can imagine that if Brazil and the rest of Latin America had signed up to participate in Washington's rendition program, Open Society would have a lot more Middle Eastern-sounding names to add to its list.

Finally, cable after Wikileaked cable revealed that Brazil repeatedly brushed off efforts by Washington to isolate Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, which would have been a necessary step if the U.S. was going to marshal South America into its counterterrorism posse.

In February 2008, for example, U.S. ambassador to Brazil Clifford Sobell met with Lula's Minister of Defense Nelson Jobim to complain about Chávez. Jobim [told](#) Sobell that Brazil shared his "concern about the possibility of Venezuela exporting instability." But instead of "isolating Venezuela," which might only "lead to further posturing," Jobim instead indicated that his government "supports [the] creation of a 'South American Defense Council' to bring Chavez into the mainstream."

There was only one catch here: that South American Defense Council was Chávez's idea in the first place! It was part of his effort, in partnership with Lula, to create independent institutions parallel to those controlled by Washington. The memo concluded with the U.S. ambassador noting how curious it was that Brazil would use Chavez's "idea for defense cooperation" as part of a "supposed containment strategy" of Chávez.

Monkey-Wrenching the Perfect Machine of Perpetual War

Unable to put in place its post-9/11 counterterrorism framework in all of Latin America, the Bush administration [retrenched](#). It attempted instead to build a “perfect machine of perpetual war” in a corridor running from Colombia through Central America to Mexico. The process of militarizing that more limited region, often under the guise of fighting “the drug wars,” has, if anything, escalated in the Obama years. Central America has, in fact, become the only place Southcom -- the Pentagon command that covers Central and South America -- can operate more or less at will. A look at this other [map](#), put together by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, makes the region look like one big landing strip for U.S. drones and drug-interdiction flights.

Washington does [continue](#) to push and probe further south, trying yet again to establish a firmer military foothold in the region and rope it into what is now a less ideological and more technocratic crusade, but one still global in its aspirations. U.S. military strategists, for instance, would very much [like to have](#) an airstrip in French Guyana or the part of Brazil that bulges out into the Atlantic. The Pentagon would use it as a stepping stone to its [increasing presence](#) in Africa, coordinating the work of Southcom with the newest global command, Africom.

But for now, South America has thrown a monkey wrench into the machine. Returning to that *Washington Post* map, it's worth memorializing the simple fact that, in one part of the world, in this century at least, the sun never rose on US-choreographed torture.

*Greg Grandin is a [TomDispatch regular](#) and the author of [Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Lost Jungle City](#), a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. Later this year, his new book, *Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*, will be published by Metropolitan Books.*

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