IT'S DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN. DANIEL ORTEGA HAS A NEW FRIEND. PHOTOGRAPHER: INTI OCON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL SECURITY

CIA Torture Made Latin America Safe for China

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By James Gibney

If you want to see how the use of torture has undermined U.S. influence and power, look at Latin America. From San Salvador to Santiago, the continent's citizens are all too familiar with the Central Intelligence Agency's interrogation techniques. Some still have the mental and physical scars to prove it.

This week, for instance, Brazil's National Truth Commission released its long-awaited report on the human rights abuses committed during Brazil's military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. Some of the torture methods used were imported by the 300 Brazilian military personnel who attended the infamous School of the Americas in the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Zone. Among their direct and indirect victims was President Dilma Rousseff, who was arrested and tortured during those years. Accepting the commission's report, she wept as she recounted her experiences.

During the latter stages of the Cold War, Central America was a veritable laboratory for U.S. torture techniques. In 1988, a Honduran Army death squad member recounted to the New York Times his training in Texas by the U.S. Army and CIA: "They taught us psychological methods -- to study the fears and weaknesses of a prisoner. Make him stand up, don't let him sleep, keep him naked and isolation, put rats and cockroaches in his cell, give him bad food, serve him dead animals, throw cold water on him, change the temperature."

In fact, as the Senate Intelligence Subcommittee's report on torture makes clear, a direct line runs between what happened in Central America and U.S. torture methods during the George W. Bush administration: An officer who had been rebuked by the CIA's inspector general for his interrogation methods in Latin America during the 1980s became the CIA's chief of interrogations in its Renditions Group in 2002.

One other historical connection is worth noting. According to a congressional report on the School of the Americas, training manuals it distributed to students from 10 Latin American countries included material on the "use of truth serum in interrogation, abduction of adversary family members to influence the adversary, prioritization of adversary personalities for abduction, exile, physical beatings and executions." When then-Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney found out about this in 1991, he ordered the manuals to be expunged of "materials considered inconsistent with U.S. and Department of Defense policies," according to the report published in 1997.

For many of these countries, to borrow from Faulkner, "the past is never dead. It's not even past." This week, for instance, Guatemala's constitutional court is weighing a genocide case against former dictator Efrain Rios Montt, once hailed by President Ronald Reagan as "a man of great personal integrity ... totally dedicated to democracy." Chile and Argentina still reckon with the brutal legacy of U.S. intervention and its support for repressive regimes that tortured, killed, or "disappeared" thousands of their citizens.

The half-life of that toxic past helps explain why, for many Latin American nations, the publication of the Senate's torture report has been something of a one-day story. Tell them something they don't know -- or that they don't think is going to

happen again.

Together with a long history of economic exploitation, the U.S. track record on torture also helps explains the suspicion of Latin American nations toward U.S. policy in general. In a recent Pew Research study of global public opinion on U.S. surveillance and drones, five of the 10 nations most hostile to U.S. policies were in Latin America. Under such circumstances, the Obama administration can perhaps be forgiven for its reluctance to be a standard bearer for democracy in the region. Even if imposing targeted sanctions on nations such as Venezuela for its human rights abuses is the right thing to do, such actions don't exactly pass the moral legitimacy laugh test.

The erosion of U.S. standing has consequences beyond just not being loved by its neighbors. Consider the competition for power and influence with China. The U.S. still has more fans than China in Latin America, but not by much. Moreover, more than half the Latin American respondents in Pew's survey say China has replaced, or will replace, the U.S. as the world's leading superpower. Latin American nations rely more and more on Chinese trade and investment. In particular, U.S. regional antagonists such as Venezuela have eagerly solicited China's economic help.

And Latin American countries seem remarkably willing to ignore China's repressive instincts. In Nicaragua, for instance, where president-not-quite-for-life Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas have exploited bitter memories of U.S. intervention and abuses during the Reagan era, Chinese investors are pursuing a project that must have James Monroe and Theodore Roosevelt spinning in their graves: a $40 billion project for two deepwater ports, a railroad and a new canal across the Central American isthmus. As Reagan once famously noted in the days of the Contras, that's "just two days driving time from Harlingen, Texas."

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