



No End in Sight

Reactions to the Film from Latin America

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Juan Gabriel Valdés

Ambassador and Permanent Representative from Chile to the United Nations, 2000–2003

Member of the Security Council during debates over the invasion of Iraq

The film “No End in Sight” made a profound impression on me.

And it brought to mind an event that took place in October of 2002, during my term as Chile’s Representative to the United Nations. At a lunch given by the Mission of Ireland to the United Nations, the ambassadors from the Arab countries allied with the United States gave us their perspectives on the proposed war in Iraq, which was already looking inevitable.

“It will take them 15 days to win the war and 30 years to get out of there,” said the Egyptian ambassador. “The Americans, fascinated by technology, have lost the capacity to gather human information: the CIA has no idea what a pound of bread costs in Iraq,” added the Jordanian ambassador. “They’ve sidelined all the experts on the Middle East and brought in loyal Cheney supporters to make decisions they know nothing about,” commented the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia. “The Shiites, with the support of the Iranians, will not rest until they erase every vestige of Sunni power,” the Algerian ambassador maintained. “Iran will emerge from this as the great power of the region,” said another. “A catastrophic scenario would envelop even Turkey,” several affirmed. And on and on.

That day, the Arab ambassadors to the United Nations accurately predicted what would happen in Iraq during the years following the American invasion. The aforementioned comments were copied directly from notes I took at the meeting.

It is surprising to think that, at that time, the Arabs were getting the same response from the United States as the representatives from Mexico and Chile, who were Elected Members of the UN Security Council during the lead-up to the Iraq war. Whenever we asked U.S. representatives how they were planning to deal with the aftermath of the military victory, we were told that, if we were good friends, we should trust them. “We know what we are doing and you, as a good friend of ours, should also know what to do: Support us.” That was invariably the response. Washington’s instructions to U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte seemed to be, “Don’t talk about the war — and even less about the



Juan Gabriel Valdés (left) with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

occupation.” The main difference was that while we Latin Americans could only “suspect” the Arabs “knew” very well what would come later, after the occupation. I, for one, could never have imagined that the irresponsibility was so great.

Today I see that the American people couldn’t either.

How could this have happened? How is it possible that the most powerful country on earth made such stupid decisions that are so opposed to its own national interest?

Because of my experiences at the UN, I feel very closely connected to the personal tragedies of the people interviewed in the film. I feel the essential honesty of what they express. I share, as a sincere friend of the United States, their indignation about the absolute irresponsibility of those who decided on this war and planned the occupation of Iraq. I cannot stop thinking about Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil when I see Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld describe “the irrelevance” of the sacking of Baghdad. And I realize that this banality of evil is always covered by a blind ideology which selects the facts that favor it and distorts them until a complete lie is created that must, sooner or later, smash up against reality.

Finally, I think that this documentary is very inspiring in that it allows us to see that the Iraqis’ terrible pain is, with time, creating a deep moral wound in the United States. This makes me share the deep desire that is alive in every friend of the United States all over the world: that the situation may soon change. For this to happen, the first step is inevitably the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

This movie is a painful and brilliant effort. It may help us reach the light at the end of the tunnel.

Daniel Coronell

Columnist for La Semana (Colombia)
Senior Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin
American Studies, UC Berkeley

A Revealing Mirror

“No End in Sight,” was, for me, an overwhelming experience.

The rigorous research and the exceptional access to interview subjects demonstrate that a poorly-managed occupation can be more violent than the war itself.

I had anticipated seeing a good documentary depicting the war in Iraq, American policies and the Middle East. Immediately, “No End in Sight” exceeded my expectations. I had never imagined that I would find this account of fatal errors so familiar.

I am from Colombia, a country that receives more U.S. military aid than any nation outside the Middle East. During the past few years, my country has received nearly \$5 billion to finance both the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. This plan was designed by the U.S. government and executed primarily by the Colombian armed forces.

Initially, many Colombians celebrated the American aid. We believed that a bilateral policy against the supply and demand of drugs could end, or at least substantially diminish, narcotrafficking. We thought that, without the millions of dollars in cocaine profits, the leftist guerillas and the rightist paramilitary squadrons would disappear. We dreamed that, by leaving behind a violent past, the millions of hard-working, honest Colombians would guarantee a peaceful and prosperous future for our people.

Sadly, this has not been the case. The War on Drugs has not significantly affected drug trafficking. The areas under coca cultivation remain at levels similar to what they had been prior to the enactment of Plan Colombia. The goal of reducing these plots by half has not been met.

Nor has the price of cocaine risen on U.S. streets. Plan Colombia had sought to double the retail price of cocaine in American cities. Despite this, after \$10.6 billion dollars spent to reduce supply, the price of the drug has not increased. In January, U.S. drug czar John Walters quietly acknowledged that cocaine cost 16 percent less in October 2006 than it did in 2000, the



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year Plan Colombia went into effect.

All of this proves that Plan Colombia is a failure. Coca fields, instead of disappearing, are being planted closer to ports and cities. Illegal coca plots have merely moved from zones under the control of leftist guerillas to regions dominated by rightist paramilitary groups.

Internal refugees now number nearly three million in a country of 42 million.

Meanwhile, powerful American companies, the makers of arms and herbicides, have received hundreds of millions of dollars in Plan Colombia contracts. Other American businesses, specializing in military training and detention facilities such as Dyncorp, are as present in Iraq as they are in Colombia.

The government of Colombia has faithfully complied with every detail of the United States’ plan. Moreover, Colombia has covered 60 percent of the costs.

What failed?

The answer is not simple, but it would serve Colombia well to know what has been happening in Iraq. “No End in Sight” could be a revealing mirror for us.

Roberto Guareschi

Former executive editor of Clarín, leading daily newspaper in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Why All These Mistakes?

“No End in Sight” effectively shows how the United States can cause enormous damage to another country, to itself and to the international system when its gigantic military and economic power is combined with a leadership that is devoid of talent and only attentive to its own fantasies.

It also shows a group of officials who are full of good intentions but without power and influence in the system. And soldiers who have risked their lives, traversing hell for the love of their country. Their testimonies make the consequences of war even more heartrending.

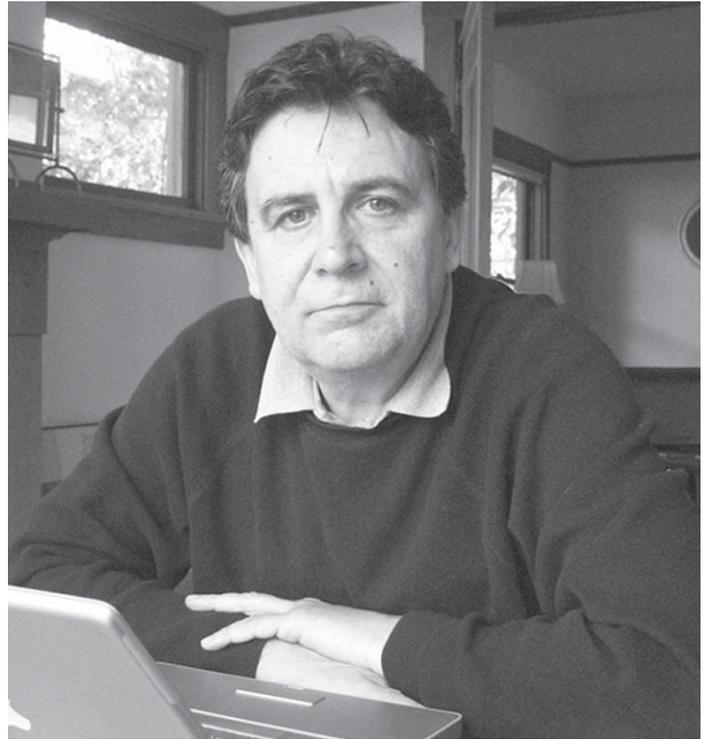
However, the eloquence with which the movie shows the catastrophic succession of operative mistakes made by the Bush administration in prosecuting the Iraq war may hide the fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq were destined to fail, regardless of the methods used. No matter if a few hundred thousand more troops had been sent or the Iraqi army had been reorganized, as the Pentagon requested. Iraq is not Panama. Nor Grenada.

There is a blind spot in the movie — nobody seems to know the causes of the failure. The director does not shy away from the problem: he himself asks General Garner, “Why do you think all these mistakes were made?” The reply is an honest admission of impotence. “I don’t know — puzzling.” The general’s admission is also that of the filmmaker.

However, the question falls short. The mistakes are not just operational. The very war itself is a mistake.

This is not the first time the U.S. has gotten mixed up in a war that is impossible to win; Vietnam was not that long ago. One mistake made by the powers that be was to believe that this time, the absence of the USSR would make success possible. Another was to believe that 9/11 was a good excuse to change the map of the Middle East, when in fact, it was a trap: the invasion ended up strengthening Al Qaeda.

The U.S. is still in the process of trying to exercise leadership in the 21st century, when the very concept of power is being redefined. President Bush presses on, at



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times solemn at times genial, but apparently unaware of the difficulties posed by an ever more connected and complex world. And Americans still seem confused because their enormous power does not translate into security, and their country can be challenged by underdeveloped nations armed with, or developing, atomic weapons. That national state of perplexity, which began on 9/11, perhaps helped to construct the broad social consensus that supported Bush and ended up reinforcing the vast set of interests benefiting from the war.

It is true: “No end in sight.” Those interests now have their own inertia, and they will not be easy to deactivate: \$1860 trillion is at stake in Iraq, according to the movie.

Neither will a quick withdrawal be easy; in all likelihood, the emptiness and chaos would only increase. Meanwhile, the war will go on, and its effects will continue to harm American society. Let’s assume there are no more Guantánamos or Abu Ghraibs. Even so, there will still be a bloody, desperate war waged with methods that may be no more “legal” than those witnessed today.

These days, when the U.S. is so often compared to Rome, it is hard not to think of Hadrian, the emperor who recognized the limits imposed by reality and resolved to end the expansion of the empire. The U.S. will not be so lucky. Today a wall like that of Hadrian in

Great Britain would make no sense: neither ramparts nor military bases can put a stop to the transit of ideas, resources and persons. There is, however, one similarity between those Romans and these Americans: no superpower can give up its leadership without self-destructing. The U.S. has no choice but to learn from its mistakes and keep searching for a solution.

Latin America has obtained one secondary “benefit” from all this. Tied up as it is in Iraq, the Bush administration has not been able to think about intervening in our region. Official statements announcing a war against all kinds of terrorism are still fresh in our minds. These statements were aimed at the whole world and — here — at Colombia. This prospect alarmed all the countries in the region, especially Brazil — Latin America’s most influential nation — which shares a border with Colombia.

Javier A. Couso

Professor of Law
Universidad Diego Portales
Santiago, Chile

The Iraqi Tragedy From a Latin American Perspective

It is hard to summarize in a few lines the impact of viewing “No End In Sight,” an impressive documentary which chronicles the deceit, improvisation and recklessness surrounding the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Seen in a South American country, far from the site of the tragedy, the film serves as a stark reminder of the daily horrors experienced by millions of Iraqis as well as the series of decisions that led to the most disastrous foreign policy adventure in American history.

The first thought that comes to mind when viewing the film is how detached we in Latin America have become from the human suffering produced by this conflict. Indeed, over the last few years we have grown accustomed to the scenes of violence that regularly come out of Iraq via the international media, to the point that they no longer shock us. But this subtle documentary is a sharp reminder of how insensitive this attitude is. Furthermore, the film provides an extraordinarily clear and thoughtful analysis of this ongoing drama in just over an hour. Seeing this kind of work, one only wishes that more such documentaries

After seeing “No End in Sight,” it is easy to imagine possible scenarios resulting from a military intervention in Colombia. Instead, Latin America is enjoying stability and economic growth thanks to the value of raw materials, something that is happening without substantially modifying social inequality. Although this is another story, it is worth mentioning because social injustice explains part of what is happening now in Iraq and the Middle East.

The violence unleashed on the people of Iraq has damaged the United States’ image in Latin America and across the world. That is obvious. Less obvious and more serious is the fact that it has also discredited the image of democracy, which was used as an excuse for war. Thus, Bush’s emotional pronunciation of the word, “Democracy,” seems ironic coming at the end of the film after so many images of pain.



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were made to help make sense of similarly complex events in other areas of the world, including our own region.

Another reflection triggered by the film is how much evil can be done when a handful of politicians kidnaps a whole governmental structure (and a whole nation for that matter) and uses that power to pursue ideological goals. This point is powerfully presented in this documentary which is remarkable for the measured way in which it makes its case.

Javier A. Couso (continued)

Then there is the reaction of seeing this film from a continent like Latin America, which is used to the ugly side of U.S. foreign policy. Although we knew that the United States can behave in a quite repressive way toward other nations (a lesson first learned during the invasions of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the late 19th century), it is quite shocking to realize how frivolous its foreign policy can be. Indeed, when one realizes that an invasion that has so far caused the deaths of over half a million innocent Iraqis was decided by a small group whose members had no previous military or foreign relations experience (and who consistently dismissed expert advice), one wonders how often something similar happened in the history of U.S. policy toward Latin America.

Another casualty of this film is the idealized image most of us had of the nature of democracy in the United States, which we thought was characterized by more accountability. It is quite depressing to realize to what extent authorities at the highest level of government in that country have been willing to

engage in deceit and even outright lies in order to carry out an invasion which has only worsened the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. It is even more dispiriting to realize that the man ultimately responsible for this disaster now looks forward to ending his term in office without ever facing impeachment.

Lastly, it is quite surprising to realize the degree of improvisation and lack of planning exhibited by the government of a country most people in Latin America regard as one of the most developed in the world. The degree of incompetence at the highest levels of the U.S. government revealed in this documentary is something most Latin Americans would be shocked to see, but all the same a reminder that human negligence is a malaise that can permeate any society.

To sum up these brief reflections on a film that speaks for itself: one can only hope that the people of the most powerful country in the world learn from this sad episode and make sure that the enormous military might of the United States is never again used to destroy a whole nation for the most frivolous of reasons.

Fernando Botero, *Abu Ghraib* 38, 2005.,



Sergio Aguayo

Professor
El Colegio de México

The United States, Iraq and Latin America

Even before seeing Charles Ferguson's documentary "No End in Sight: The American Occupation of Iraq," I was anticipating its thesis and plot. But even so, it was rewarding to analyze what it actually says and suggests.

Ferguson takes three theories shared by the majority of our globalized planet as his starting point: the American invasion of Iraq was an ethical mistake, an organizational disaster and a humanitarian tragedy. The movie's merit lies in the fact that it shows the current Republican administration's responsibility: George Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, among others, are presented as paradigms of superficiality, shadiness and insensitivity, updating Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil for the 21st century.

Polls agree that support for the United States has collapsed around the world, and particularly in Latin America. This is due to the rejection caused by the invasion of Iraq and to reasons that impel me to give this film a place in history.

Neoconservative aggression in Iraq reminds us of the long tradition of unilateral intervention that we Latin Americans know all too well. Time and again we have suffered from that "American custom" of defending U.S. interests while invoking higher principles in order to justify the drive to impose the American way of thinking and living on the world.

If the invasion of Iraq is condemned so strongly, it is in part because neoconservatism is also associated with the destruction of the environment. It is impossible to forget that the government of the country that is most responsible for global warming is the most reluctant to take corrective measures. It is also associated with the neoconservative tendency to force scientific thinking into the Procrustean bed of religious beliefs. And in Latin America that is worrying because we have an equally tragic history of church interference in politics and knowledge.

From another point of view, "No End in Sight" reminds us of the plurality of the United States, a vital



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society that is confronting neoconservative policies with arguments and images. Ferguson's documentary is proof of a complexity and diversity that, luckily, has not been domesticated by the conservative right. From this perspective, "No End in Sight" joins a tradition that also produced "Hearts and Minds," that memorable documentary by Peter Davis (1975) that condemned, with facts and images, his government's aggression in Vietnam.

For all these reasons "No End in Sight" is a movie worth remembering and sharing.