

Lars Schoultz

Winner of the 2019 Kalman Silvert Award

Of all the factors that led Baby Boomers to have an interest in Latin America, none was more important than the Cuban Revolution. In the late 1950s Fidel Castro had led a group of revolutionaries down from Cuba's mountains, ousted a Washington-friendly dictator, and begun nationalizing US investments, eventually seizing them all. Then in 1960, the year Lars Schoultz entered college, Cuba befriended the Soviet Union. After arguing in the 1950s that the region was "not in the line of Soviet advance," in the early 1960s President Kennedy was repeatedly warning that Latin America was "the most dangerous area in the world."

Although not quite as alarmed as JFK would have wished, Schoultz made his contribution to the containment of communism soon after receiving his BA at Stanford, when the US Information Agency accepted his application for a teaching fellowship in Bucaramanga, Colombia. There he spent a year arguing with his students about Washington's benevolent intentions, and during that give-and-take he slowly discarded the rose-colored glasses that 1950s California had passed out to his generation. Other than that, he had the time of his life. No exams to take. No term papers to write. Good hours. Teaching might be a profession to consider.

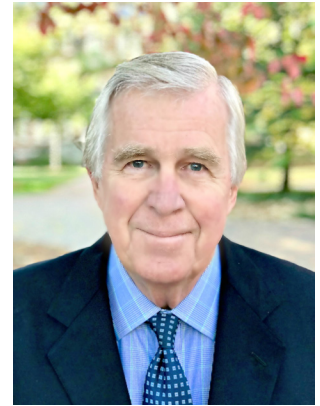
After Bucaramanga came a brief stint in the US Army Reserve, followed by frittering away a couple of years in San Francisco until 1969, when Schoultz enrolled in the political science graduate program at the University of North Carolina, attracted by Federico Gil, one of LASA's founders and early presidents, and the second recipient of the Kalman Silvert Award. Gil urged his students to give more academic attention to the democratic road to reform and redistribution, so Schoultz studied how populists win elections, with Peronism as a case study. A year of research in Buenos Aires led to a dissertation that conformed to the political

science standards of the time; when it was turned into a book (*The Populist Challenge: Argentine Electoral Behavior in the Postwar Era*), librarians took one look and placed it in off-site storage.

Then, as Cuba had attracted Schoultz to Latin America, Chile now steered him to US policy.

At this point—age 31—he finally had an actual job, teaching Latin American politics from 1973 to 1977 at Miami University, and from 1977 to 1979 at the University of Florida. It was in the first of these years that a military coup became a human rights calamity for Chileans and a professional crisis for Schoultz. The coup had occurred in September 1973, only days after he had handed his first students a syllabus built around the notion that Latin Americans were taking the peaceful road to reform and redistribution, with Chile as a central example. Caught with his intellectual pants down, this newly minted assistant professor told skeptical students that he would give them a revised syllabus next week. He had no idea what it might contain.

The Department of State came to his rescue. It had its own problems here in the 1970s, most related to the Vietnam debacle, but anyone who looked beyond southeast Asia to Latin America was aware of Washington's hostility toward Chile's socialist government. At first the public knew little about the substance of this hostility, but the 1973-1974 Watergate scandal had a silver lining: it weakened the Nixon-Ford administration's ability to withhold information from Congress. So now, just as Schoultz was having his teaching crisis, and just as Richard



Nixon was being impeached, several congressional committees began publishing ream after ream of documents and taking day after day of sworn testimony that chronicled the destruction of Chile's democratic government, the entrenchment of a brutal military dictatorship, and indisputable US complicity in both.

In this context the State Department's battered Latin America bureau launched an effort to win back the hearts and minds of the academic community by conducting a series of "Scholar-Diplomat Seminars." The goal was to convince critics that Chile was atypical of US policy or, should that fail, that the CIA was responsible for everything.

Schoultz was among a dozen relatively young academics (all white, all male, none Hispanic) invited to the first of these week-long seminars, where each participant shadowed a desk officer in the mornings and then listened in the afternoons as mid-level officials explained US policy. Among the professors were several with remarkably deep knowledge of Washington's relations with individual Latin American countries; they listened politely to the "Chile is an aberration" argument, then took turns erupting like Mt. Vesuvius during the Q&A. There was never a second Scholar-Diplomat Seminar.

One of the academics' specific accusations, dismissed out of hand by the State Department's Latin Americanists, was that the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger foreign policy apparatus was systematically providing a disproportionate amount of its economic aid to bolster repressive governments. Ignorant but intrigued, Schoultz decided to put his study of Latin American politics aside—temporarily, he told himself, and only to conduct a short study about foreign policy. He asked a set of 91 Canadian and US-based experts on international human rights (all he could identify) to rank the human rights behavior of each Latin American government on a scale of one to four. Then he calculated the mean for each country and compared it to the amount of US economic aid, controlling for each country's population size and poverty level. The simple correlation between aid and repression was positive and high; in general,

the more repressive a Latin American government, the more aid it received from Washington. Chile was not atypical.

This spur-of-the-moment study was far from definitive, but here was something that seemed useful to study—US policy has often been closely related to Latin America's political and economic realities. And, almost equally important, here was something Schoultz might be able to understand well enough to explain to his students. Kissing comparative Latin American politics goodbye, he applied for an SSRC grant to study US human rights policy and, coincidentally, he was to spend his first year in Washington during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

The Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress served as his base, where he was handed something unthinkable today: a pass to the stacks. They housed the world's largest collection of printed US government documents, literally every single one of them going back to the eighteenth century, and Schoultz had them at his fingertips. Starting with the most recent congressional hearings, he began to identify Washington's small community of "human rights" NGOs—organizations like the new Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), with leaders like Joe Eldridge, a Methodist minister serving in Chile until a month after the coup. Along with others, Eldridge opened doors Schoultz never would have found without assistance.

The resulting study, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton University Press, 1981) had been guided by the hypothesis that elected officials may set the tone of US policy, but ground-level policy—who is to do exactly what to exactly whom—emerges out of the interaction among bureaucratic institutions competing and collaborating to further their specific interests: the Pentagon's long-standing interest in maintaining close ties to the Latin American military, for example, or the State Department's Carter-era interest in promoting human rights.

Schoultz's study confirmed the importance of bureaucratic politics, but in part because of a flaw in his research: he had tended to focus on lower-level battles, largely because the participants agreed to be interviewed. Some of their decisions had nontrivial implications, but often there was no consensus at lower levels, so the deadlock required decisions by higher-level officials. These senior officials played a minor role in the book but a major role in the policies covered by the book.

Not only did this call for re-searching, but new data were also available: now Ronald Reagan was in the White House, and US policy was focused on the upheavals in Central America, not Southern Cone dictatorships. Returning to Washington for another year with SSRC support, Schoultz focused on how policymakers assessed the two rival explanations of Central America's turmoil: Was it due to poverty (the revolution of rising expectations) or to communism (Soviet probing of Washington's "soft underbelly")? What he learned was (a) that the "poverty" people had better supporting evidence but (b) that did not matter because the "communism" people (Jeane Kirkpatrick et al.) were in charge of the Reagan administration's policy.

"Anti-communism trumps its rival" was the not-so-surprising takeaway for readers of *National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton University Press, 1987), but the surprising part, at least to Schoultz, was how the security of a superpower came to be linked to Central America. While there were some economic interests in play, Schoultz found them of minor importance; the United States did not want much of anything from Central America. Washington simply did not want others to have it, and not so much because it might generate another Cuba-style exodus, nor because it would make it easier for an adversary to launch a surprise attack. Instead, the Reagan administration warned about the *worldwide* credibility of US foreign policy if the United States failed to keep Central America on its side of the balance of power: "Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy." The United States had a vital interest in not having to back down.

As we are seeing in today's debate about a wall along the border with Mexico, this national-security trump card is always available, but it was especially easy to play here in the 1980s, soon after the debacle in Vietnam and the hostage humiliation in Iran. Opinion polls indicated that a substantial number of citizens believed the United States needed to reassert its resolve to contain Soviet expansion, and for this reassertion the Reagan administration had Central America. Unlike faraway Vietnam, it was a convenient site—*Our Own Backyard* was the apt title Bill LeoGrande chose for his compelling assessment of Washington's policy. Central America was a place where the United States could win, but as LeoGrande and so many others pointed out, only if not much attention was given to the devastating costs being paid by Central Americans.

Published in 1987, only two years before the Soviet sphere began to crumble, *National Security and United States Policy toward Latin America* had a short shelf life. The longer-term personal impact was for Schoultz finally to admit that his knowledge of the historical context of US policy was woefully inadequate. He had about one sentence worth of knowledge about why Nicaragua's rebels called themselves Sandinistas. He knew even less about the historical role played by the banana lobby in US policy. And he had never systematically examined the foundational statements of US policy toward Latin America, not even the Monroe Doctrine. It was time to plunge into the archives.

That would have to wait for several years, for Schoultz had returned to Chapel Hill as a professor and would soon become a minor administrator. The year he returned, 1979, was also the year the Sandinistas threw out the Somozas, and Central America had quickly skyrocketed to the top of Washington's foreign policy agenda, where it would stay for a decade. This triggered a nationwide growth of Latin American studies; in North Carolina it included creation of the Duke-UNC Program in Latin American Studies, with four generous Mellon Foundation endowment grants to the two institutions. That allowed the joint program to launch a number of new initiatives and soon to achieve Title VI National Research Center

status and more funding, much of which was used to attract Latin American scholars as visiting professors.

A MacArthur Foundation program supported Schoultz during two of these “administrative” years, but his research time was limited not only by his responsibilities at UNC but also by a substantial amount of work with LASA, including its presidency in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, a supportive dean authorized the Political Science Department to hire two senior Latin Americanists, “youngish ones,” she said. This led to the recruitment of Jonathan Hartlyn in 1988 and Evelyne Huber (along with comparativist John Stephens) in 1993, all three of whom became invaluable colleagues and dear friends. Then, with a level of guilt that proved to be surprisingly manageable, in 1994 Schoultz dropped his teaching and administrative responsibilities into their laps and set out for a year at Washington’s Woodrow Wilson Center.

His proposal to the Wilson Center was to study what interviews had suggested during his earlier Washington research: a belief among US policymakers that Latin Americans are an inferior people. Now the question was whether this belief fit into the full sweep of Washington’s relations with Latin America. Was it a constant or a variable?

Academics often disagree about the point when “occasional” becomes “frequent” and when frequent becomes “prevalent,” but after a few years in the archives it was not particularly difficult to see that this belief about Latin Americans’ inferiority had been prevalent from the beginning, at the turn into the nineteenth century when, for example, an early US envoy to Brazil reported: “There is a sad defect somewhere either in the institutions of the country, or the temper and habits of the people.” The archives are packed with similar dispatches from the first half of the nineteenth century, and they are not much different from what Schoultz had observed during his Washington research in the Carter and Reagan years, and from what we all have seen during these Trump years.

A subtitle was not planned for *Beneath the United States* (Harvard University Press, 1998) but one was added because the study had expanded during

a decade of research into *A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*. Schoultz will tell you he had started out with less-sweeping ambitions but found archival research seductive—enjoyable in the same way that a jigsaw puzzle is fun. It certainly was not work. A second reason it took so long was that he struggled, unsuccessfully, to understand the slow shift that occurred from the simple observation of inferiority in the nineteenth century to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century effort to improve Latin Americans. What, for example, had led a 1960s assistant secretary of state (Thomas Mann) to tell Congress that Latin Americans needed Washington’s help if they were going to improve their “thinking and habits and moral standards”?

That shift from passive observation to active involvement would become the focus of a quite different book. Before that, however, Schoultz told himself that he needed to stop putting off the study of something that had interested him since his days as an undergraduate, and especially since his first two trips to Cuba during the Reagan years: How had these neighbors managed to make such a mess of their relationship?

Now masquerading as something of a historian, Schoultz convinced the National Humanities Center to support him for a year so that he could begin at the beginning, in 1781, when the Continental Congress sent a consul to Havana—its first envoy to anywhere in Latin America. Seduced once again by the archives, it took Schoultz 11 years to time-travel from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, and then to write *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009). It argued that Washington rarely understood the meaning of “Patria o Muerte.” It was about respect. Cuba’s revolutionary generation would rather fight than allow their country to be treated as if it were beneath the United States.

With that study complete, Schoultz could turn to the question that had bedeviled him while researching *Beneath the United States*: Why, ever since the 1898 war with Spain, has the United States been trying to improve Latin Americans, to make them more “developed,” less inferior?

Two polar theories offer two different answers.

One has long been associated with Adam Smith, who argued it is a part of human nature to assist others who are less fortunate. And so as the United States became rich and powerful, and as its citizens noticed that many others remained poor and weak, human nature nudged early twentieth-century Washington to establish Caribbean and Central American protectorates, and to send money doctors to straighten out Latin Americans' finances, and democracy doctors to improve their governance.

The other theory was captured best by Hans Morgenthau, an advocate of realism. He insisted that "foreign aid is no different from diplomatic or military policy or propaganda. They are all weapons." To realists, development assistance (today's term for foreign aid) is a mechanism of conquest, soft subjugation, an alibi for power.

Schoultz concluded that both theories are needed to explain today's uplifting effort. *In Their Own Best Interest: A History of the U.S. Effort to Improve Latin Americans* (Harvard University Press, 2018) conceives of today's policymakers as arrayed along an altruism-to-realism continuum, the single most interesting feature of which is that everyone at every point on the continuum believes the United States should do something to improve Latin Americans. They differ only about why.

And Schoultz also found that today's uplifting did not develop in a linear fashion. Rather, it is the product of two bursts engineered by two generations. The Progressive generation in the early twentieth century created today's uplifting mentality, cementing into US foreign policy a belief that the United States should improve "underdeveloped" peoples. Then after a quarter-century interlude, the Cold War generation created the institutions that compose today's uplifting industry. The Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, and their brethren represent the transformation of uplifting from an ad hoc activity—a money doctor here, a few Marines there—into a deeply entrenched set of institutions.

Today's Washington-based uplifting industry employs tens of thousands of direct-hire individuals and private-sector contractors. Acting in concert, they have solidified the belief that development assistance is both a humane obligation *and* a useful tool to promote US interests. To have captured both the altruistic hearts and the realistic minds of just about everyone in Washington is an extraordinary achievement for an industry that is dismissed with contempt by many and subject to criticism by most.

If that is where we are today, where are we heading? Schoultz's best guess is in the conclusion of *In Their Own Best Interest*. It will be the focus of his comments at LASA's Kalman Silvert panel in Boston. //