

# Mainstream Media Miss Rumsfeld's "Dirty Wars" Talk

By Jim Lobe | December 1, 2004

If in the near future Latin America returns to the military dictatorships and "dirty wars" of its all-too-recent past, analysts may point to the a conference in late November in Quito of the hemisphere's defense ministers—and particularly Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld's role in it—as a milestone in that journey. If they did, however, their assessment would surely draw a blank among the readers of U.S. newspapers or viewers of its television. For the vast majority of them, the conference was the equivalent of the proverbial tree toppling unheard and unseen in some vast, unobserved forest.

While the major media were filled with speculation about Rumsfeld's future in President George W. Bush's second term, his contribution to the meeting was entirely ignored by the electronic media and major newspapers with just a handful of exceptions.

That was unfortunate because, in many ways, the Quito meeting confirmed an evolution in U.S. policy that has been underway since Bush declared his "war on terrorism" after the Sep. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Indeed, the purpose of the gathering was to erect a "new architecture" for continental security in which the armed forces, in Washington's view, would play a central role.

## New Continental Security Architecture

For almost two decades, the United States has urged Latin American militaries to move away from the Cold War "national-security" doctrines that resulted in so many abuses in the region. But last week Rumsfeld appeared to be preaching the virtues of reviving such an approach, perhaps under a new name, like "national sovereignty."

Indeed, in remarks to his fellow defense ministers, Rumsfeld even suggested that, given the challenges posed by 21st-century threats, it was time to rethink the separation of the armed forces from the police—a major reform pursued by U.S. and Latin American human-rights organizations as a way of asserting civilian control over the military and reducing abuses.

"Since Sep. 11, 2001, we have had to conduct an essential re-examination of the relationships between our military and our law enforcement responsibilities in the U.S.," asserted Rumsfeld, who never let the phrase "human rights" pass his lips. "The complex challenges of this new era and the asymmetric threats we face require that all elements of state and society work together."

Indeed, the Pentagon chief included under the rubric of "enemies" faced by the region's armed forces a number of actors who normally would come under the jurisdiction of the civilian authorities. "Terrorists, drug traffickers, hostage takers, and criminal gangs form an anti-social combination that increasingly seeks to destabilize civil societies," he declared, further blurring the line between the roles of the military and the police.

And during the drafting of the final communiqué, Rumsfeld's delegation resisted a Canadian move, backed by Brazil and Chile, to balance its anti-terrorism provisions with explicit references to international human rights and humanitarian law, according to Gaston Chillier, an Argentine lawyer from the Washington Office on Latin America who observed the conference.

"They were essentially saying, 'terrorism is the priority for the region, and international human rights law is not a requirement in combating terrorism.'" Chillier continued, "This is exactly the wrong message in a region where militaries used this philosophy during the dirty wars to commit gross human rights violations."

In another update of the national-security doctrine of the 1960s and 1970s, Rumsfeld also pushed for greater cooperation among the region's militaries, particularly in border regions where "enemies often find shelter."

"Strengthening sovereignty, and ensuring effective sovereignty over our national territories must be a fundamental goal," he said. "There is no one nation that can meet these challenges by itself; it is simply not going to be possible," he added twice for emphasis.

## The Mass Media Miss Another Story

Despite the obvious implications of Rumsfeld's remarks for Latin America and the future of U.S.-Latin American relations, however, the mainstream U.S. media did not see



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fit to give them—or the strong resistance to them on the part of most of the defense secretary’s Latin American counterparts—much attention.

Although the major wire services, Associated Press and Reuters, carried some reports from Quito, only a few newspapers published them, usually in a much-abbreviated form. The conference was ignored by the *Washington Post* and noted in a relatively brief item in the *New York Times* that focused on Rumsfeld’s contention that routes used by smugglers to move undocumented foreigners into the United States could be used as easily by terrorist organizations. Longer articles appeared only in *The Miami Herald*, the *Denver Post*, the *Akron Beacon Journal*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. But in almost all of these accounts, Rumsfeld and senior officials are virtually the only quoted sources, according to a search of the Nexis-Lexis database.

Virtually the only instances when Latin American officials were quoted were in relation to the badly lagging deployment of troops to the Brazilian-led United Nations peacekeeping operation in Haiti and to the willingness of the region’s military to cooperate more closely against drug trafficking. Latin American troops make up by far the largest component of the peacekeeping force in Haiti.

Of the newspapers that covered the conference, only the *Miami Herald* stressed Rumsfeld’s recommendations on expanding the role of the military in dealing with the region’s security problems and quoted Jose Pampurro, the Argentine defense minister, and his Brazilian counterpart, Jose Alencar, on the subject.

An article published in both the Denver and Akron newspapers was the only one that did not quote Rumsfeld at length and that stressed that Latin Americans saw the question of security in a much different light than the one cast by the Pentagon chief. Written by *Denver Post* correspondent Bruce Finley and entitled “Latin America Wary of Calls for Help in Anti-Terror Effort,” it was also the only one that cited non-governmental sources, including several people who had participated in a rally near the conference site to call attention to the plight of children in Latin America.

It also quoted retired Gen. Rene Vargas, the former head of Ecuador’s military, as raising questions about U.S. intentions in his country and the disconnect between U.S. strategy and Latin American priorities. “In Latin America, there are no terrorists—only hunger and unemployment and delinquents who turn to crime,” he was quoted as saying. “What are we going to do, hit you with a banana?” The same article quoted Brazil’s Alencar as calling for global disarmament, and insisting, “the cause of terrorism is not just fundamentalism, but misery and hunger.”

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