

Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 8 No. 2 January 30, 2008

Argentina and the United States: An Alliance Contained. David M. K. Sheinin. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006

Jorge R. Rogachevsky
Dept. of International Languages and Cultures
St. Mary's College of Maryland

In 1990 I visited a family in the Nicaraguan northern border town and *contra* stronghold of Quilalí the day after a major demobilization of *contra* fighters. As we sat around the family home, the youngest child signaled me to follow. We walked down the street and my young friend dashed into an open doorway. When I followed he disappeared into the back of the house and left me at the entryway. To my left was another doorway, and behind it the sound of laughter. A man came through the doorway and eyed me suspiciously. When I explained that I had been following and had been left stranded by my impish guide, he reached into a barrel, pulled out some beers, and invited me inside, where I met five young men who introduced themselves as *comandantes* celebrating their demobilization, and was offered a beer. I introduced myself as a visiting Argentine, and my drinking buddies informed me with great jocularly of their fondness for Argentines, having received their training from the Argentine military.

This experience confirms David Shinin's thesis that "although frequently punctuated by episodic conflict, the history of U.S.-Argentine relations is one of cooperative interaction" (4). From Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 19th century call to emulate the United States, to the military's logistical support for intervention in Central America, to the *menemista* program of neo-liberal Washington Consensus orthodoxy, Argentine elites have often looked to ally themselves with United States interests. In order to buttress his thesis, Sheinin tackles key areas of U.S.-Argentine divergence. Three of these are particularly emblematic: tensions over Argentine attempts to assert sovereign control over oil resources; tensions over Argentine desires to develop nuclear capabilities; and, the most significant historical period of U.S.-Argentine confrontation, the first Perón era, 1946-1955.

The politics of oil in Argentina began early in the 20th century "when deposits were found in Patagonia in 1907" (62). Sheinin then traces the on again off again competition for control of oil resources between Argentine nationalist governments and the U.S., showing that, whereas elected Argentine governments often needed to appeal for popular support by adopting a rhetoric of control over natural resources, the exigencies of economic management also led to a search for accommodation with the U.S. The irony of this approach was that such governments lost the confidence of their domestic supporters due to their equivocation regarding nationalist principles, while at the same time never really gaining the trust of U.S. administrations because of their public rhetoric, making themselves vulnerable to military overthrow, as in the cases of Perón's second administration in 1955, Frondizi's government in 1962, and Illia's in 1966 (111, 115, 142).

Whereas policy regarding oil resources pitted the rhetoric of nationalist politicians against U.S. interests, with the Argentine military playing the spoiler role, the push to develop nuclear capabilities saw an alliance of sorts between civilian and military sectors. According to Sheinin, "military governments in the 1970s did seek a level of readiness such that Argentina might always be within five years of producing a small nuclear arsenal" (95). Civilian administrations, in particular the Alfonsín government, showed more interest in promoting an Argentine nuclear policy based on Sur-Sur relations, as was the case with Dante Caputo, Alfonsín's Foreign Minister, who "came around to the military's vision of the nuclear sector as a means of generating millions of dollars in trade and advancing Argentina's strategic position within the nonaligned movement" (188-189). However, despite U.S.-Argentine tensions based on disagreements surrounding the development of nuclear technology, U.S. strategic interests were never challenged:

The Argentines wished for Americans not to read bilateral disagreements as an indication of Argentine antagonism. . . . Argentina became a vociferous critic of U.S.-Soviet nuclear rivalry. But it did so cautiously, never taking any action specifically critical of U.S. strategic or foreign policies. (189)

Finally, Sheinin's main thesis is corroborated by his analysis of the real policy objectives followed by Juan Perón,

Argentina's principal governing antagonist of the U.S., during his second administration:

. . . Perón's rhetoric – when directed against Washington – had little if any impact on inter-American relations or American foreign policy in the region. . . . In June 1955, as Perón fought back an attempted military coup d'état, [U.S. Assistant Secretary of State] Henry Holland spoke with members of Congress at a secret meeting of the Latin American Sub-Committee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. . . . Holland found himself defending what he described as Argentina's friendly politics towards Washington. (110)

Sheinin's research provides a good foundation for his claim to challenge "the prevailing scholarly and popular view of U.S.-Argentine hostility from the Age of Jackson in the United States to the Carlos Menem presidency in Argentina and beyond" (4). His study, therefore, offers valuable material to any scholarly investigation of U.S.-Argentine relations. At the same time, the book is not well suited for general readers. The level of detail provided is valuable to the specialized researcher, but would overwhelm the general reader. More so since Sheinin does not develop a well articulated historical narrative that explains the interaction among different sectors of the Argentine elite at different historical junctures. There is no clear frame of reference in the book to trace systematically how military, economic, and political elites framed their interests in relationship to each other, and towards the United States. The lack of a well articulated historical narrative limits an understanding of critical areas of U.S.-Argentine engagement, such as the Argentine military's direct support for the U.S. proxy war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, or the Menem administration's catastrophic embrace of neoliberal economics in the 1990s. Sheinin offers much valuable detail, but his text lacks a well articulated view of the big picture.