

Democracy, Dictatorships & the 4th of July

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Washington, DC—Controversial documentary filmmaker Oliver Stone spoke at the National Press Club June 23 about *South of the Border*—his sympathetic look at the controversial presidencies of leftist South American leaders like Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales. But Stone's documentary also touched on the role U.S. foreign policy had in molding these populist movements – a exploration he shares with a recent panel convened by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Together with the National Museum of American History, the Smithsonian Latino Center hosted an onstage forum called "A Fresh Look – US Perspectives during Argentina's Military Dictatorship (1976-1983)." The onstage conversation covered the relationship between the U.S. government and Argentina's military dictatorship in the period of the Latin American country's history know as the "Dirty War." The panel is part of the SLC's program "Argentina at the Smithsonian 2010," a year-long compendium of different events emphasizing Argentine culture and history.

The event was moderated by NPR journalist María Hinojosa and featured Juan Méndez, a professor at American University and a human rights lawyer who was imprisoned in Argentina. Other speakers included Cynthia Anson, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, and F. Allen "Tex" Harris, a former political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires.

"I think the most important thing (about the issue of the dictatorship) is lessons learned, where we go from here," Hinojosa said. "How do we make sure that these things don't happen again, on anyone's watch?"

During Stone's Press Club address, he echoed the SLC panel's view that the recent history of Latin America, and Argentina in particular, has been fraught with dictatorships and tyrannical governments.

"Forty years ago, most of South America was run by oligarchs and dictators," Stone said. "Torturers were kept busy and often they were trained by us . . . The results were disastrous."

But unlike the military coups of Argentina's past, the dictatorship during the late '70s and early '80s was a particularly ruthless one. "Nineteen seventy-six is a turning point (in Argentina's history of military coups) in the sense that the military took over as it had in the past, but this time, they unleashed a campaign of repression and counter-insurgency . . . that by any standards of today, we would call crimes against humanity," Méndez said. "(There was a deliberate) pattern of disappearances, by which I mean unauthorized detentions without any due process or any warrant, and people being taken off to clandestine detention centers."

The relationship between the Dirty War dictatorship and the U.S. government was tenuous. Anson, who worked for Congress during the Carter administration, admits that the dictatorship's arsenal initially had American training and backing. "There was a lot of information showing the U.S. government, through training programs, through weapon sales and through police training had had a direct relationship with the very same military and police forces that were engaged in these wide-scale human rights abuses," Anson said.

But both Anson and Harris point out that the Carter years were different when it came to the U.S. government's foreign policy in Latin America. "We had a policy before of very strident anti-communism under Nixon, Kissinger, and Gerry Ford," Harris said. "Carter ran a campaign generated by congressional pressures of a new vision of America's foreign policy, which was based on human rights."

Although officials like Anson and Harris were instrumental in bringing the abuses of the Dirty War government to light, the idealism of the Carter administration would soon dim when President Ronald Reagan was elected. In an effort to promote anti-communist unity between the U.S. and its allies, Reagan reversed Carter's human rights agenda and rekindled diplomatic ties with the military dictatorship.

In his National Press Club remarks, Stone suggested that the U.S. has strayed from the Carter years of a foreign policy based on human rights, and has continued to support groups that would topple left wing governments like the U.S.-backed coup attempted to do to Hugo Chavez in 2002. "Is it any surprise to you that Chavez and his partners don't like us?" he said.

Stone thinks that Argentina and its allies in South America have learned from the atrocities like the Dirty War by elected populist presidents that are bent on reforming the economic and political systems of their countries. "(The leaders we interviewed) wanted economic independence, political independence, and they want to use their natural resources, which they have in abundance, to help the poor," he said.

In keeping with the notion that an understanding of Argentine culture is key to establishing a better relationship between its government and the U.S., the SLC's "Argentina 2010" program is showcasing other events that embrace Argentine culture and history. On July 29, the SLC will collaborate with the National Museum of the American Indian in hosting "All Hands on Design!", featuring hands-on activities for adults and children while showing the artwork of indigenous Argentine designers. The "Argentina 2010" program will continue to host events through December.

This Independence Day, those who wish to compare the democratic ideals that spearheaded the founding of this nation with those that jumpstarted our southern neighbors might be interested in seeing *South of the Border*. Select theatres in the Washington area are currently showing the film. For more information on *South of the Border*, go to www.southoftheborderdoc.com.

To gain greater appreciation of how our democratic ideals play out under different President's as foreign policy, watch the full webcast of the Smithsonian Latino Center's "US Perspectives" panel, at <http://latino.si.edu/newsevents/webcasts.htm>.

About the Smithsonian Latino Center

The Smithsonian Latino Center fulfills its stated mission of "teaching the untold stories of Latinos in America" by facilitating the development of exhibitions, research, collections, and educational programs at the Smithsonian and partner organizations. The Center has sponsored over 300 Latino-themed projects in the past decade, with the support of both federal and private sector groups.

For more information about SLC

Capital Gallery

600 Maryland Ave. SW

Suite 7042 MRC 512,

Washington D.C. 20024.

ph: 202.633.1240

fax: 202.633.1132

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CONTACT:

By Cal Colgan

CapitalWirePR

202 662 7242

info@capitalwirepr.com