

America/Américas: Myth in the Making of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America

Eldon Kenworthy



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In a few short years, Latin America has passed from being a contentious issue in U.S. foreign policy, to one scarcely discussed, to a concern once again with the unrest in Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti. In this study Eldon Kenworthy explains how popular images and the language in which they are embedded affect the making of foreign policy in the United States toward its Latin American neighbors. In particular, the author looks at how the Reagan administration tried to sell its policy on Nicaragua to the American public at a critical juncture in 1986 when it had to contend with a Congressional prohibition of military aid to the Contra rebels. The advertising techniques employed provide a fascinating case study in the refurbishing of old myths for the manipulation of public opinion to support a political crusade.

In examining the subtext of the discourse that U.S. leaders reproduce unconsciously, Kenworthy explores the boundary between discourse analysis, which rarely moves beyond texts, and policy analyses that emphasize rationality. U.S. leaders view the hemisphere not only through the calculus of domestic political advantage but also through the prism of historical experience. Buried in the discourse of Washington's relations to Latin America is the myth that fueled the consolidation, then expansion, of federal rule in U.S. territories. Visions of a U.S. project have become conflated with dreams of hemispheric unity. Today, a stable relationship with Latin America cannot be established as long as the U.S. continues to use a discourse grounded in old myths and identities.

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