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By Louise F. Montgomery

## Images of the United States In the Latin American Press

*Latin American papers  
giving smaller proportion  
of space to coverage of  
U.S. than they did  
a quarter of a century ago.*

► In 1959, the U.S. State Department refused to grant press cards to reporters from four Argentine cities who were accompanying the Argentine president on a state visit to Washington. U.S. government officials insisted that the reporters' home cities were in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Some time later, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, when he was introduced to a UNESCO official, responded: "I know your country. Small, but charming."

Benno Weiser Varon on Feb. 4, 1984, related the perhaps-apocryphal LBJ story in *El Comercio*, Quito, Ecuador, in a column on the editorial page<sup>2</sup>. He wrote that no U.S. president today would mistake UNESCO for a country — or praise it. Yet while making fun of the American for being ignorant, the columnist took his side ideologically: "To me, I prefer Groucho Marx to Karl Marx. I like Ionesco more than UNESCO. The second is the founder of the theater of the absurd."

Ideological kinship with the United States, however, seems to have become an insufficient reason for Latin American newspapers to devote space to the United States; they are paying far less attention to

<sup>1</sup> Wayne Wolfe, "Images of the United States in the Latin American Press," *Journalism Quarterly*, 41:79-86 (1964).

<sup>2</sup> "The U.S. and UNESCO," p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Wolfe, "Images of the United States in the Hispanic American Press: A Content Analysis of News and Opinions of the Country Appearing in Daily Newspapers from 19 Latin American Republics." Unpublished dissertation, Indiana University, 1963.

the United States than they did in 1959, this study of coverage of the United States in principal newspapers in the capitals of 19 Latin American nations indicates. In addition, attention paid to what were some of the good things in American culture — entertainment and sport — has dropped dramatically since 1959, when Wayne Wolfe identified the various images Latin American newspapers portrayed of "the colossus to the north."<sup>3</sup>

The most dramatic change in coverage occurred in Cuba, where the paper Wolfe studied, *Diario de la Marina*, disappeared in the Cuban revolution; this study utilized the only general-news newspaper published in Havana, *Granma*, the Communist Party newspaper. As could be expected, coverage in *Diario*, distinguished in 1959 by publishing more American sports news than other type, and *Granma* are vastly different. *Granma* focused almost totally on U.S. government and politics (Table 2) and 39% of its U.S. government news dealt with the military.

Another dramatic change, paralleling a trend in U.S. journalism, is the attention paid to science. Two significant scientific events — a problem-plagued space launch and the birth of the first test-tube baby in the United States — occurred during the sample week, Feb. 1-7, 1984; each of the 20 newspapers in the sample covered the space story and most published the test tube baby story. The space story was the only event that showed up in all of the newspapers; not even Michael Jackson's hair catching fire during filming of a commercial made every newspaper.

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Lessened coverage of Hollywood and a dramatic decrease in coverage of sports, particularly baseball and boxing, occurred between 1959 and 1984. Apparently Latin American nations' own sports competition has expanded and they are able to create and import materials with greater cultural closeness than that from the United States. While many newspapers still devoted large stretches of space to pictures and studio-handout stories from the United States, coverage of Hollywood has dropped, as tables presented later in the study indicate.

This study was designed to replicate as nearly as possible the 1959 Wolfe study.<sup>4</sup> When the principal morning newspaper used in Wolfe's study was not available, either because it ceased publication or could not be obtained, another influential, large-circulation newspaper was obtained. This study covers 19 newspapers; the only country in Wolfe's study that is not covered in this study is Paraguay, where newspapers in 1984 were not free to publish and many, including the paper used in the original study, had disappeared. Newspapers analyzed were: *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, Argentina; *El Diario*, La Paz, Bolivia, (Feb. 1-5, 8); *Diario do Brazil*, substitution for *Correio da Manha*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; *O Estado*, substituting for *Diario de Sao*, Sao Paulo, Brazil (Feb. 1-5, 7-8); *El Mercurio*, Santiago, Chile; *El Tiempo*, Bogota, Columbia; *La Nacion*, substituting for *Diario de Costa Rica*, San Jose, Costa Rica; *Granma*, substitute for *Diario de la Marina*, Havana, Cuba; *Listin Diario*, Santo Domingo, substitute for *La Nacion*, Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic; *El Comercio*, Quito, Ecuador (Feb. 2, 4-7); *El Diario de Hoy*, San Salvador, El Salvador (Feb. 1, 3-7); *El Imparcial*, Guatemala City, Guatemala; *La Tribuna*, substitute for *El Dia*, Tegucigalpa, Honduras (Feb. 1-2, 4-7); *El Universal*, Mexico City, Mexico; *La Prensa*, Managua, Nicaragua (Feb. 1-2, 4-5, 7); *La Estrella de Panama*, Panama City, Panama; *La Tribuna*, Asuncion, Paraguay; *El Comercio*, Lima, Peru; *El Dia*, Montevideo, Uruguay; *El Nacional*, Caracas, Venezuela. Feb 1-7, 1984, issues were analyzed except as indicated in parentheses following newspaper names.

All stories dealing with the United States, including those focused on an international agency such as the International Monetary Fund that mentioned the role of the United States, were counted and measured. Each was analyzed on the basis of the image it conveyed of the country, specifically, whether it fell into the 12 facets Wolfe found in 1959: positive images of a democratic, friendly and generous nation; neutral images of a powerful, affluent nation where sportsmen are predominantly spectators; or negative — European-biased, ignorant about Latin America, imperialistic, shallow in cultural terms, arrogant and friends of dictators.

Surprisingly, even as many Latin American nations came to full realization that they were strangled by debt, the majority of the newspapers did not place blame for their problems on the United States. Most used U.S.-based wire service stories on IMF negotiations and did not add critical adjectives or commentary as is the practice in some countries in the Third World.

But the data from 1984 reveal some dramatic and serious changes in Latin American newspapers' treatment of the United States.

First, Table 1 indicates how much coverage of the United States had decreased, both in average inches and as a percentage of the total news hole. While the average inches published in each newspaper dropped by one-third — from 1,500 inches to 1,047 inches — the percentage of the total news hole devoted to U.S. news dropped from 12.5% to 6.5% — from one eighth to one fifteenth.

Table 2 also provides detail on the use of U.S. news by each newspaper. U.S. news items published during the week ranged from low of 29 in Bogota's *El Tiempo* (which had the second-highest number of pages) to a high of 165 in *O'Estado*. The high and low newspapers in total inches of U.S. news (and, consequently, in daily average) shifted to *El Diario*, La Paz, and Santo Domingo's *Listin Diario*, a range from 417 to 2,562 inches. Those newspapers were not the smallest and largest in pages published; the low distinctions belonged to

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

TABLE 2  
Inches and Number of U.S. Stories by Newspaper  
for Week of February 1, 1984

Newspapers	Inches U.S. News	Average U.S. Story Length (in inches)	Number of U.S. Stories	Daily Average U.S. News (in inches)
El Comercio, Lima	504.5	14.42	35	72.1
El Comercio, Quito	522.5	13.06	40	74.61
El Dia, Montevideo	1151.	16.26	68	164.4
El Diario, La Paz	417.	13.9	30	59.6
El Diario de Hoy, San Salvador	706.5	19.1	37	100.9
O'Estado, Sao Paulo	1881.	11.4	165	268.7
Estrella de Panama	1729.25	28.3	61	247.
Granma, Havana	827.0	9.5	87	118.
El Imparcial, Guatemala	545.8	9.7	56	78.
Jornel do Brazil, Rio	639.5	10.8	59	91.4
Listin Diario, Santo Domingo	2562.	38.23	67	366.
El Mercurio, Santiago	1066.	13.67	78	152.3
La Nacion, San Jose	713	10.8	66	101.9
El Nacional, Caracas	1662.5	27.7	60	237.5
La Prensa, Buenos Aires	903.35	8.6	105	129.1
La Prensa, Managua	677.5	16.94	40	169.4
El Tiempo, Bogota	673.	23.2	29	96.1
La Tribuna, Tegucigalpa	1094.5	26.7	41	156.4
El Universal, Mexico	1613	29.3	55	230.4
Total	19888.9	NA	1179	NA
	Avg. 1,047	Avg. 16.8	Avg. 62.1	Avg. 153.4
1959 Study	Avg. 1,500	Avg. 8.9	Avg. 169	Avg. 214.3

TABLE 1  
Inches and Number of U.S. Stories,  
U.S. news as Percentage of All News,  
February 1-7, 1984 and 1959

	1984	1959
Average number of inches of U.S. news published in each newspaper	1,047 <sup>a</sup>	1,500 <sup>a</sup>
Average number of U.S. stories in each newspaper	62.1	169
Average length of U.S. stories in inches	16.8	8.9
Percentage of all news devoted to U.S.	6.5	12.5

<sup>a</sup>Includes editorials and photos as well as news.

Santo Domingo's *Listin Diario*, a range from 417 to 2,562 inches. Those newspapers were not the smallest and largest in pages published; the low distinctions belonged to advertising-free Granma with 42 pages; *La Prensa*, Managua, with 52 pages, in the four days it published during the sample week; and *El Imparcial*, Guatemala City,

with 80 pages. The highs belonged to *El Nacional*, Caracas; *El Tiempo*, Bogota; *El Universal*, Mexico City; and the two Brazilian newspapers, *O'Estado* of Sao Paulo and *Jornal do Brasil* of Rio de Janeiro.

As the comparison between 1959 and 1984 at the bottom of Table 2 shows, the average attention to the United States decreased in every aspect for which data are available except the average story length.

Several newspapers published considerably more U.S. news than the sample average. *Listin Diario's* 2,562 inches compares with the sample average of 1,047. But the inch total, while impressive, is about the same as the total for the Dominican Republic newspaper included in the 1959 sample, *La Nacion* of Ciudad Trujillo; *La Nacion's* U.S. coverage totaled 2,565 inches of pictures and news, plus an unspecified quantity of editorials and opinion<sup>5</sup>. Five newspapers in the 1984

<sup>5</sup> Wolfe, "Images of the United States in the Hispanic American Press," 1963, p. 499.

sample dropped below the lowest mark in 1959 — 664.5 inches for the week in the Honduran newspaper.

Table 3 reveals the varying importance of U.S. news to Latin American newspaper gatekeepers. *La Prensa*, Managua, devoted almost one-fifth of its news hole to the United States, while *El Tiempo*, Bogota, devoted 1.9% of its news hole to the United States. The allocation of 19.4% of its news space indicates *La Prensa's* devotion to the United States, which by 1984 was helping finance the newspaper's operation as it tweaked the nose of the Sandinista in every way possible. But *El Tiempo's* inattention to the United States is puzzling in view of other Latin American newspapers' attention.

The overwhelming attention paid to government and politics (Table 4) repeats the pattern Wolfe found in 1959.<sup>6</sup> In that study, 22.5% to 60.4% of the newspapers' U.S. news dealt with the topic. In 1984, the range was from *Listin Diario*, Santo Domingo, with 23.0% to *Granma* with 85.2%. No other category rivaled government and politics for first place in 1984, although in 1959 the Cuban newspaper had more sports than government news.

The high percentage of U.S. news in *La Tribuna* in Tegucigalpa indicates the role the United States plays in that country's relationship to war-torn Nicaragua. The U.S. military presence in Central America is reflected in the region's attention to U.S. news: In addition to the Honduran newspaper's 12.2% and *La Prensa's* 19.4% (Table 3), *La Nacion* in San Jose, Costa Rica, devoted 8.6% of its news to the United States. Only *El Diario de Hoy* in San Salvador — with 4.2% — devoted below the sample average (6.5%) to the United States.

As Table 4 indicates, the changes in the government in Cuba show up dramatically in the contrast between 1959 and 1984. In February 1959, the ideological direction to be taken by the new premier, Fidel Castro, hadn't become apparent, nor had he destroyed the pro-western press. By 1984, Cuba had been firmly incorporated into the Marxist camp of the U.S.S.R. and anti-Americanism was one of the cornerstones

TABLE 3

Percentage of U.S. News by Newspaper

	U.S. News %	Total Inches of News
El Comercio, Lima	3.0	17515
El Comercio, Quito	3.2	15950
El Dia, Montevideo	NA <sup>a</sup>	
El Diario, La Paz	2.6	8860.5
El Diario de Hoy, San Salvador	4.2	1744
O'Estado, Sao Paulo	7.0	26936
Estrella, Panama City	9.2	18710
Granma, Havana	13.5	5292
El Imparcial, Guatemala City	7.8	6955
Jornal do Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	2.5	25290
Listin Diario, Santo Domingo	7.7	33353
El Mercurio, Santiago	5.0	21344
La Nacion, San Jose	8.6	8295.
El Nacional, Caracas	4.8	32582.
La Prensa, Buenos Aires	8.0	11345.
La Prensa, Managua	19.4	3488.
El Tiempo, Bogota	1.9	35582
La Tribuna, Tegucigalpa	12.2	8952
El Universal, Mexico	7.0	23125
		305318
		Avg. 16.962

<sup>a</sup>Missing data

of Castro's ideology. While it is not possible to determine whether anti-Americanism played a direct role in reducing the quantity of U.S. news printed in other newspapers, it is reasonable to expect that newspaper editors and other gatekeepers who resent America's long dominance in the region might show their hostility by a decision not to print U.S. stories. On the other hand, allegiance to the United States undoubtedly played a role in the Managua newspaper's heavy use of American news. The Dominican Republic's many business ties to the United States could help account for its uncommon interest in this country.

Distribution of space devoted to the United States among the categories shows another dramatic change in the reduced attention to sport — a drop from 12% in 1959 to 6.6% in 1984. Another jump — but in the opposite direction — occurred in science, medicine and technology. That

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 500.

TABLE 4  
Percentage of News about U.S. by Newspaper and by Category

	Government and Politics and Economic Activity	Social Problems	Accidents and Disaster	Cultural Activity	Entertainment	Science, Medicine and Technology	Sports	Human Interest	Miscellaneous	Total Column Inches <sup>a</sup>	
El Comercio	44.9	7.6	—	—	7.8	8.	29.4	—	2.0	522.5	
El Comercio	40.4	22	1.5	1.2	—	10.5	40.1	3.6	—	504.7	
El Dia	7.4	8.4	—	—	—	37.0	6.3	.003	.006	1151.0	
El Diario	45.5	16.1	—	—	5.9	10.5	19.5	—	2.6	417.0	
El Diario de Hoy	74.8	.42	.7	.63	—	1.4	17.4	4.2	3.8	.42	706.5
O'Estado	65.8	6.4	.005	—	.001	8.4	12.2	2.0	1.3	3.2	1881.0
Estrella de Panama	61.4	6.6	—	.7	—	8.1	7.7	12.3	2.9	—	1729.0
Granma	85.2	4.5	3.6	—	—	1.2	.004	4.2	.007	827.0	
El Imparcial	53.5	—	7.8	—	—	5.8	5.7	25.1	—	2.1	545.8
Jornal do Brazil	63.3	—	4.8	.9	10.	.45	19.9	.7	—	—	639.5
Listin Diario	23.0	17.6	6.6	—	4.1	8.5	11.	14.2	10.5	1.8	2562.0
El Mercurio	32.8	5.4	1.1	.9	—	7.7	26.2	3.0	1.8	.9	1065.8
La Nacion	41.0	6.7	—	1.5	1.2	8.9	27.8	1.9	—	11.	713.0
El Nacional	57.1	3.9	1.4	—	7.6	11.4	6.1	10.2	2.2	—	1662.5
La Prensa,											
Buenos Aires	34.4	34.1	1.	—	7.9	7.7	13.5	.3	1.	—	903.4
La Prensa, Managua	60.4	.6	.2	2.4	—	.7	33.1	2.4	—	—	677.5
El Tiempo	40.6	—	12.8	—	1.8	12.9	11.6	18.7	1.6	—	673.0
La Tribuna	77.3	.8	2.7	2.9	—	8.8	2.9	4.7	—	—	1094.5
El Universal	47.3	12.7	3.2	1.1	.6	17.8	10.1	5.9	.4	1.6	1613.0
% of all coverage	51.7	9.1	2.7	.6	2.3	10.1	23.3	6.6	2.3	1.3	98.7*
1959 Study — %	41.4	12.5	5.0	5.0	5.0	11.0	3.4	11.8	1.5	3.7	100.3*

\*Rounding caused totals to deviate from 100 percent.

<sup>a</sup>Based on 6-column format. Totals for pages with other formats were adjusted to the 6-column standard.

category in 1984 accounted for 13.3% of coverage, compared with 3% in 1959. The category "accidents and disasters," too, changed dramatically; while a low figure — 5% — of 1959 coverage fell into that category, in 1984, less than 1% of U.S. news dealt with accidents and disasters. While it might be that newspapers with a special reason to portray the United States negatively would have a greater-than-average allocation of space in this category, the opposite seems to be true. *Granma* had no stories in this category, while *La Prensa*, Managua, published 16.5 inches — 2.4% of its U.S. total — in the category.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfe, "Images of the United States in the Latin American Press," 1964, p. 82.

Another change in the images of the United States is that the distorted map portrayed in 1959 has become further distorted. Twenty-five years ago, "Not a single dateline came from the area of the United States starting at the western border of Minnesota and going to Washington (state) and Oregon," Wolfe wrote.<sup>7</sup> That area was once again slighted, and only 14 states appeared in the sample, compared with 31 in the original study. Government's dominance shows up in geographic distribution of datelines in the newspapers. Washington was the dateline 187 times, New York 72, Cape Canaveral 58, Hollywood and Houston eight each.

The expected appearance of domestic or

regional wires, such as UNESCO-subsidized Prensa Latina, did not occur except in *Granma*, which used AP in only one issue and only to make fun of the United States. Many of *Granma's* U.S. government stories originated in Moscow and were written and distributed by Tass, the Soviet news agency, that was provided without charge. Non-Tass wire credits belonged to Prensa Latina. The only AP stories in the *Granma* sample were boxed under a headline: "They lie and contradict themselves." One AP story was headlined "U.S. to keep permanent force in Honduras." The other was headlined "Reagan denied that he contemplates permanent military in Honduras." Commentary with the boxed stories said that they appeared on AP 90 minutes apart and made clear that "they lie, distort and manipulate information."

Apart from the special case of *Granma*, the traditional dominance of UPI in the region continued with it being credited 217 times and AP 101. EFE, the Spanish wire, had the third-highest usage with 83, followed by Agence France Presse with 63. The New York Times wire was credited 43 times (in six newspapers). Except for nine credits in *Granma*, the Tass credit appeared only once — in *Journal do Brasil*.

While Wolfe found a multi-faceted America in Latin American newspapers in 1959, positive images in 1984 were overshadowed by a warlike image. Curiously, editorial commentary on the United States was limited, and many of the op ed pieces were written by American columnists (James Reston, George Ann Geyer, Drew Middleton, etc.).

Most of the stories published about the United States in other parts of the world dealt with military actions, and several newspapers ran a New York Times Wire Service analysis of foreign aid noting that Reagan's offer of Latin American aid was "small in comparison with that given to Israel and Egypt."<sup>8</sup>

Foreign aid stories — usually UPI or AP — were numerous, but editorial commentary on the debt problem was limited. Several expressed hope that more U.S. aid money would be available for development, but some questioned the motivation of the offer. "Millions for whom?" asked a headline on an editorial about an Reagan aid proposal.<sup>9</sup> Attention to U.S. foreign policy was increased during the sample week by the visit of Secretary of State George Schultz to Latin America; however, most newspapers ran straight hard news stories from UPI or AP. Editorial commentary was surprisingly bland.

In conclusion, Latin American newspapers' treatment of the United States is dominated by government and politics, with a lion's share focused on a militaristic image. The altruistic American image was tainted by questions about why the "friendly people to the north" were offering aid.

The most positive change occurred in the Latin American nations' interest in the American space effort; Challenger pictures and stories were splashed over front pages throughout Latin America. In addition, Latin American baseball players on American major league teams got full coverage in their home-country newspapers.

This study makes it clear that Latin America is painfully aware of the benign neglect the United States demonstrates toward it. However, even when other suitors are calling, as Cuba and Nicaragua show, Latin American newspapers seem to be willing to forgive the United States' inattention and ignorance. U.S. policy makers should be aware, however, of the long-term implications in Latin American newspapers' reduced news coverage of the United States.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the Feb. 3, 1984, *El Nacional*, Caracas, Venezuela.

<sup>9</sup> "Milliones para quien?" Editorial, *La Nacion*, San Jose, Costa Rica, February 1, 1984.