

Q&A with Rebecca Weber

Jackson School Journal: Could you start with a brief description of the focus of your research?

Weber: My research explores the tricky relationship between national sovereignty and international cooperation through a history of U.S. military basing in Latin America during World War II. When U.S. strategists first tried to build military bases in Latin America on the eve of global war, few Latin American leaders were prepared to consent. Before the war, a tide of nationalist popular politics swept Latin America, often tinged with anti-U.S. sentiment provoked by decades of U.S. military intervention in the region. In the 1930s, to lessen those tensions, the Roosevelt administration committed to a policy of non-intervention in Latin America, but a lot of people in the region eyed this policy with suspicion. In this context, the proposal to build U.S. bases in the region was contentious. To evade the initial obstacles to U.S. defense construction posed by both popular and diplomatic opposition, the U.S. War Department contracted the airline Pan American Airways to secretly build and expand airbases across Latin America under the guise of commercial expansion. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, popular support grew in Latin America for more active cooperation with the United States in defending the hemisphere. After that time, U.S. bases were built in a more

“above board” fashion, under the banner of inter-American cooperation in the defense – and bases proliferated. But the basing projects were advanced hastily and the terms of basing were improvised along the way. Not surprisingly, conflicts over governance quickly emerged. My book project reconstructs the ad hoc governance arrangements that were negotiated at base sites in Cuba, Panama and Brazil and examines the struggles by local actors who tried to preserve national sovereignty in the face of the U.S. military presence. I focus in particular on conflicts over governance that cropped up in the realms of labor rights, discrimination, gender relations and the sex industry, and criminal jurisdiction over U.S. troops.

Jackson School Journal: How did you first become interested in this field of work?

Weber: I was originally thinking of different ways in which I could look at US-Latin American relations besides doing just a political history or a policy history, and I got interested in Pan American Airways somehow. It was the United States’ first international airline and its first routes began in Latin America: the first route was between Florida and Cuba. It then grew to encompass all of the Americas and then during World War II it expanded to Europe and Asia. I was just sort of thinking about how aviation shrinks the distance between places,

and Pan Am was really active in the war and had always been regarded by some in the region as an agent of US foreign policy even though it was a commercial enterprise. So I was interested in the collaboration between business and government in projecting US power in Latin America. And then I learned about the Airport Development Program, the contract the War Department had with Pan-Am to build these airfields under the guise of commercial expansion – that really got my attention! So I looked around and there hadn't been anything written on it, which I was really surprised by. I just thought it was such an interesting story. I didn't know at the time how it might contribute to the field but I wanted to learn more, so that was where I started. And then as I went into the archives and started to learn more about the experience of the Brazilian workers who were hired in the Amazon to build the airfields, and that sort of thing, it started to become much more about the places where the bases were built than about Pan Am as an airline.

Jackson School Journal: What would you say is the relevance of this history to today, especially in regards to US - Latin American relations or bases?

Weber: Well, with regards to bases, I'm struck by how often I see headlines on conflicts concerning US bases around the world today that resonate with the kinds of conflicts that came up at these very early experiments in US overseas basing. Criminal jurisdiction is a big one. That was one of the sticking points in trying to negotiate an extended military presence in Iraq: who could police the behavior of US troops? I think that the ability to police the behavior of anyone within a national territory is one of the defining features of national sovereignty so to compromise that

I think feels like a very big compromise of national sovereignty, particularly when it's at the behest of a power like the United States. That was certainly the case in Latin America during World War II, and similar issues seem to arise in Okinawa, Japan. In Latin America there are fewer US bases than there are in a lot of other regions of the world and part of that today has to do with a resurgence of nationalism and sort of a leftward movement in Latin American politics where a lot of popular leaders are rising to power in part by rejecting US influence, particularly the US military presence in Latin America. For instance, there was a major US military base in Ecuador that was closed down by the president [Rafael Correa] and he has since also expelled US military attachés. I think that the military presence that the United States does have in Latin America today often relies on its very informality. For example, there are US troops that will operate at Latin American military bases rather than having official US bases. Part of that has to do with the difficulty of convincing the public that having US military bases in Latin America is acceptable. I think that in some sense a lot of the same issues are continuing to arise but the informality of arrangements today makes the ways in which national leaders may be compromising national sovereignty at the request of the United States less visible to the general public.

Jackson School Journal: Could you go over your academic career for us?

Weber: I was an undergraduate at Duke University and I created an interdepartmental major in literature and history, and I had a second major in Spanish. I learned Spanish in college – I had studied French prior to that,

so that was very new – and I did a summer of research in Santiago [Chile] for my honors thesis in addition to a semester when I studied abroad in Madrid. When I graduated I moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I had an internship with a human rights organization that had an archive of different materials that documented the last military dictatorship in Argentina, and the human rights atrocities that were executed during the dictatorship. I worked with them on a multimedia graphic exhibit that commemorated the anniversary of the coup that brought that dictatorship to power. I spent nine months working with them, and then at the end of that nine months the exhibit went up and it traveled around Argentina. Then I stayed in Argentina for another year doing freelance documentary work and translation. After that, I moved to Boston for a year for a documentary fellowship where I worked with Latin American immigrants and refugees who were living in the area. We did some “know-your-rights” activism, educating undocumented immigrants about what their rights were and what they should do if they encountered an immigration official or if they were stopped by police. And then I returned to Argentina for one more year, and during that time I applied to grad schools. I went to grad school at UC Berkeley – I was in the History Department – and I studied Latin American and US History.

Jackson School Journal: Do you have any advice or next steps for Jackson School students in general, or maybe those who want to pursue work similar to yours?

Weber: Yes – I’m so happy that I moved abroad after college! I was very fortunate that I was able to find a way to do that financially. I was awarded

a grant to do the internship with the NGO in Argentina, so I recommend that students look into any kind of fellowships or grants that might be available through the university or external sources. I also have a lot of friends in Argentina who made a living either teaching English or doing translation services or a handful of other odd jobs so that they could pay the bills while they were exploring a new place and solidifying their language skills and taking time to travel. I really valued the three years I spent there and they truly helped me find out what direction I wanted to go in professionally, aside from just being a really cool life experience. If any 21 year old who is about to graduate from college came to me and said, “I’m thinking about moving abroad, is that irresponsible?” I would say “No! You should do it! You can make it work!” I would say also if you’re considering going for a PhD then it is a really good experience spending some time immersed in the place where you’re going to focus your studies. It will also make you a stronger candidate when it comes time to apply. I suspect that a lot of Jackson School students may be interested in getting involved in the nonprofit world or considering a master’s degree, and I think if you can get international experience in the process then that’s ideal.

Jackson School Journal: What do you hope to add to the Jackson School in the coming years?

Weber: I am really looking forward to building and creating new classes that are oriented towards US-Latin America relations or the relationship between the United States and the world. The Jackson School has such a strength in area studies so I think it will really be a great addition for people who are concerned with area studies to think about the influence the United States has

had in their regions for better or worse. I'm also looking forward to developing relationships with undergraduates that are interested in these sorts of things, or who have questions about what to do after college or how to decide what's next. I think that will be really rewarding.

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Jackson School Journal: Do you have any recommended reading lists or news sources for news and topics in Latin America, especially related to your area of research?

Weber: Let's see. I'm on a couple of list serves where I get sort of news updates from all over the place. For example, there's a UC-Cuba initiative, so people who are involved in the University of California system who do any kind of research in Cuba will often circulate news either that they've written or received. I think there's something cool about having your community contribute to the news you're reading. I also subscribe to a few Google News Alerts, particularly because as a historian I really like to stay on top of what the contemporary relevance of my historical research is and to think about what I'm looking at in the past through the lens of the present. So I have a Google News Alert for US military bases and one for status of forces agreements, which is anything involving questions of jurisdiction and the terms of US military presence overseas.

I'm considering doing a second project about international disaster relief, so I also have a news alert for anything that comes up, which as you can imagine is a lot. And there's one other daily news compilation that comes out, I think it's called Just the Facts. It's a list of news articles on Latin America drawn from all different sources in English and Spanish. I get an email, I'm not sure who curates that list, but it certainly makes my life easier!

Interview by Sarah Foster