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The ambush of a president -- and liberation theology

by Arthur Jones

THE PRIEST OF PARAGUAY: FERNANDO LUGO AND THE MAKING OF A NATION

By Hugh O'Shaughnessy

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The former bishop, father of a child and promiscuous beyond that, in effect set the trap on himself. His enemies, however, sprung it on him. Suddenly the obscure Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, head of a country most people cannot quickly place on a South American map, was notorious.

Lugo, ordained in 1977, studied at the Gregorianum in Rome and was appointed a bishop in 1994. He resigned from his diocese in 2005 to seek the presidency -- for which the Vatican admonished him. It was not until his 2008 victory that he received a gift from Pope Benedict XVI who also absolved him from his religious vows. Early this year he admitted fathering a son, Guillermo, in 2007.

'Few political ambushes,' writes Hugh O'Shaughnessy in *The Priest of Paraguay*, 'have been better prepared.' Certainly, the resigned bishop, a former Divine Word priest, had left himself wide open, even in a region where priestly concubinage is more tolerated than condemned. Yet, as O'Shaughnessy explains, there's a far darker side to this ambush.

In winning the presidential election, the former bishop had broken the corrupt right-wing Colorado Party's 60-year grip on the nation of 1.2 million people. For 35 of those 60 years (1954-89), Paraguay had been controlled as the personal fiefdom of General Alfredo Stroessner, a man Washington was pleased to have as an ideological ally, though they may have privately deplored his fondness for a succession of 14-year-old girls.

Paraguay had an unchallenged reputation for corruption and for poverty.

O'Shaughnessy recalls it was under Stroessner that Eisenhower sent Col. Robert Thierry of the U.S. Army to Paraguay from May 1956 to March 1958 to teach torture techniques to the *Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Técnicos*, the National Department of Technical Affairs. Three thousand Paraguayans were tortured by *la Técnica*, and thousands more by its satellites in police stations around the country. Lugo's anti-Colorado Party father and three of his uncles were among them. Waterboarding seriously damaged Lugo senior's health and led to his early death.



Lugo's own 2009 *emboscaderos* were the South American right wing and its U.S.-pleasing, capitalism-promoting partnerships. The ambush was not merely politics as usual; it was about liberation theology and land reform -- in a nation where the richest 1 percent of landowners hold 80 percent of the land, and this in a nation where agriculture brings in 90 percent of foreign earnings.

Paraguay's Lugo, Presidents Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil, Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Correa of Ecuador are as wary of big money from the North and politico-military Washington as they are of powerful local landowners. They also have a historic understanding of much of their hierarchies' fondness for national military and wealthy right-wing blocs.

Each of these five presidents knows he is in Washington's sights and those of its hired spin doctors, and sociopolitical gunslingers and agents provocateurs. Yet in O'Shaughnessy's words, these five leaders' presence on the South American scene signifies the happy re-emergence of the sort of reforms that had been championed for decades by liberation theologians and which their opponents -- from Pope John Paul II to President Ronald Reagan, the former intellectually, the latter by force of arms -- had done much to suppress.

Ergo, the ambush of the 58-year-old Lugo was also about the liberal and left leadership emergence in South American nations. Lugo is the political flowering of liberation theology that Washington, its right-wing South American allies, and a church in Rome that enjoys playing the diplomatic game have reason to fear.

Lugo and the other presidents also have much to fear: Ask those who lived through Chile's Pinochet or Argentina's 'Dirty War'; through the United States' invasions of Panama and the Dominican Republic and Grenada; through Reagan in El Salvador or the failed U.S. invasion of Cuba. These U.S. attitudes and spins are not one-time castoffs in history's dumpster; this is the continually churning garbage of the Monroe Doctrine and the strategically based -- in Washington and therefore more easily manipulated -- Organization of American States.

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The United States, offscreen in action, onscreen in condemnation, is not going to allow these leftists and liberals their way -- if it can prevent it. The same forces that pushed NAFTA through are at work here, the politico-commercial complex that has superseded without replacing the military-industrial complex.

These two are the terrible twins of U.S. might and intent.

They are up against an emergence that represents also the rights of South America's "least of these," the generally landless indigenous. In Paraguay, they are the Guaraní. "The movement for indigenous rights," O'Shaughnessy states, "was not to be suppressed by bayonets and torture chambers." It manifested itself in domestic politics from the Chiapas region in Mexico in 1994 to Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile.

The spark point is that "indigenous rights" translates into agrarian reform: the last thing the 1 percent of landowners holding 80 percent of the land wish to hear. It is extremely significant that part of Lugo's 2008 presidential acceptance speech was in Guaraní, the language of the majority of Paraguayans; as significant as the attendance of "the octogenarian Ernesto Cardenal, the priest-poet of liberation theology" and Leonardo Boff, the liberation theologian from Brazil.

British journalist O'Shaughnessy has covered Latin America for almost half a century for the major British papers. The book is somewhat repetitive, highly detailed and therefore a little slow-going at times. (I have a passing personal quibble, that he twice mentions "U.S. journalist Penny Lernoux" without saying who she wrote for -- the *National Catholic Reporter*.)

Don't be deterred, this is a very important book about the new face of South America. Lugo politically legitimates liberation theology, he was democratically elected, overwhelmingly by the indigenous. That alone is sufficient to rally Lugo's enemies in Paraguay, in Washington and in the Catholic church.

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