

**Lewis Tambs, Latin American Geopolitics and the American New  
Right**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the career, geopolitical writings and political role of Lewis A. Tambs (1927-). Tambs is an academic, specialising in the history of Latin America at Arizona State University, but he is also an expert on Latin American geopolitics and he was the first North American to explore and analyse the extensive literature on Latin American geopolitics. His writings on Brazilian expansion and the role of the Charcas heartland also had influence on Latin American geopoliticians. Tambs has also been active in conservative Republican politics in the USA, both through policy groups and documents such as the Santa Fe report of 1981 and also through direct political activity. He was a member of Reagan's National Security Council and then Ambassador to both Colombia and Costa Rica during the 1980s, and he remains active in conservative politics, emphasising the geopolitical importance of the threat of narco-terrorism. The paper concludes with a critical assessment of his writings and their political role.

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## **Lewis Tambs, Latin American Geopolitics and the American New Right**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A central focus of the recent academic literature on geopolitics has been the role of geopolitical ideas in the American foreign policy of the Reagan and Bush eras. Much of the work on critical geopolitics and the concepts of formal versus practical geopolitical reasoning has developed with this focus (Dalby, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; O' Tuathail, 1992, 1996; O' Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; O' Tuathail, Dalby and Routledge, 1998). These analyses have critically examined the ideas of geopolitical writers such as Colin Gray (e.g. Gray, 1977, 1988) and others associated with the CPD (Committee on the Present Danger) in reinvigorating appreciation of the Soviet geopolitical threat, ideas which were influential in the Reagan years. However, a second influential strand of Reaganite geopolitics has so far received much less attention in these studies, and it is this strand that is the focus of this paper.

American global strategy and priorities during the 1980s were quite strongly guided by assessments of Hemispheric security and the problems of instability and Soviet threats in Latin America, as Dunkerley has shown in his study of Central America (Dunkerley, 1988). However these hemispheric aspects were not given priority, and in the main were not discussed at all, in the more traditional 'containment-deterrence' geopolitics of Gray and the CPD. This has meant that an important dimension of 'The Reagan Doctrine' has received little attention from academic and critical studies of U.S. geopolitics. For example, a well-known and widely-syndicated cartoon by Tony Auth showed Reagan's mental map, with the USSR as a large threatening mass overshadowing a small USA, but also with enormously enlarged Cuba and Nicaragua threatening El Salvador and the USA. The cartoon is reproduced in *The Geopolitics Reader* (O' Tuathail, Dalby and Routledge, 1998, 94), but none of the accompanying readings (which include a CPD policy extract) focus on this global-Latin American geopolitical linkage, nor has the linkage received attention elsewhere in the critical geopolitics literature (except for the study of US-El Salvador geopolitical relations in O' Tuathail, 1986).

An important figure in the construction and practice of this 'Latin American dimension' to the Reagan Presidency's global geopolitics was Lewis Tambs. Tambs was, and is, a Professor of Latin American History and a specialist in Latin American geopolitics. The Latin American geopolitical tradition is now well known in the Anglo-American academic literature (Child, 1979, 1985, 1988; Dodds, 1993, 1994, 1997; Hepple, 1986, 1992; Kelly 1997; Kelly and Child, 1988), but it is usually seen as a specialist arena without major implications for global geostrategy. Tambs' writings argued that Latin America had become central for US geostrategy, and his ideas (and rhetoric) were carried into policy in the Reagan period of the 1980s. Tambs' geopolitical ideas were significant in the construction of Reaganite 'New Right' foreign policy, Tambs himself was the key author of the highly-influential Santa Fe Report, and he served in the Reagan administration for five years with posts

at the National Security Council (as the same period as figures like Oliver North and Admiral Poindexter) and Ambassadorships to Colombia and Costa Rica.

This strand of 'formal' geopolitical theorising being carried into political practice deserves wider recognition, and this paper examines Tambs' career, the development of his Latin American geopolitical writings and the ways in which it led to a contemporary policy orientation. It then looks at the political impact of these ideas (and Tambs' direct involvement) in the 1980s.

## **EARLY AND ACADEMIC CAREER**

Lewis Tambs was born in California in 1927. After military service in Japan in 1945-47 and the USA 1950-51, he graduated in industrial engineering from Berkeley in 1953. From 1954 to 1959 he worked as an oil-pipeline engineer in Venezuela, before returning to study Latin American history and become an academic. He obtained his M.A. from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1962 and his PhD (also from Santa Barbara) in 1967. From 1965 to 1969 he worked at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, before moving to Arizona State University at Tempe, Arizona, where he has remained, becoming full Professor in 1975.

Tambs' PhD thesis was on the geopolitics of Brazil's expansion to the west (Tambs, 1967), and it is this geopolitical theme in Tambs' writings that this paper will focus on. It is the major theme in Tambs' academic work, but he has also worked in other, unrelated areas. With Gerald Kleinfeld he has produced a major study of the "Spanish Blue Division", a Spanish-manned military division that fought for Hitler in Russia in World War Two (Tambs and Kleinfeld, 1979), and with Alexander Birkos he had co-authored three volumes of *Academic Writer's Guide to Periodicals* (Tambs and Birkos, 1971-1975) and two other bibliographic works.

## **TAMBS AND BRAZIL'S MARCHA PARA OESTE**

Tambs' initial research focus was the geopolitical interpretation of Brazilian history, and especially on Brazil's westward expansion. This work built on a well-established Brazilian geopolitical tradition that evolved from Backheuser's early work in the 1920s, through later work by de Carvalho and Travassos, to the work of General Golbery and General Meira Mattos in the 1950s and 1960s (Pittman, 1981). This geopolitical perspective was highly influential in the military regime after 1964 (where Golbery had key posts) and helped guide many of the policies on rapid Amazonian development (Foresta, 1992). From the original colonies on the coast, the Portugese-Brazilian empire had expanded westwards over four centuries, gradually acquiring territory that the Spanish empire (and later its independent successor states in South America) laid claim to. The original 'division of the world' between Spain and Portugal in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) allocated most of the Amazon basin to Spain, but it was Brazil that acquired the mouth of the river and began to explore and colonise up the basin. By the 1750 Treaty of Madrid, Spain conceded most of the basin to the Portugese, but Brazil's 'conquest by colonisation' continued and later treaties with Spain and the successor states gained further territory up unto 1907. The

appeal of geopolitical interpretations of Brazilian history has been that it gives a central role to the geographical dimension, in contrast to more traditional constitutional-jurisprudential interpretations that trace treaties and ministries but seem to miss out these central (and narratively appealing) threads (Hepple, 1986). The *Marcha para Oeste* also fulfils something of the same role as 'Manifest Destiny' did in the United States: part narrative, part myth, it provides a direction which contemporary analysts and policy-makers can appeal to.

Tambs' particular contributions to this analysis are threefold. First (as befits the professional historian) is detailed documentary and archival research on aspects of the expansion, best exemplified in his work on the Brazilian acquisition of the Acre region, where Brazilian foreign office archives are extensively used (Tambs, 1966). Secondly, he brought to bear a detailed attention to the Spanish-language South American historical and geopolitical literature, a literature somewhat neglected by Brazilian writers in their interpretations and analyses. Thirdly - and springing from the second - Tambs brings a broader perspective on Portuguese-Spanish (or Luso-Hispanic) rivalries and competition, combining precise detail with a continental perspective. Tambs' papers are very effective at large-scale synthesis, bringing together diverse literatures (including English-language geopolitical writing) and relating their perspectives, and for South America, where geopolitical analysis has often been locked into national (and nationalistic) school, this facet of Tambs' work has had a significant impact. There is also a fourth aspect, one that also plays a role in Tambs' later political writings: he writes very directly, making effective use of short sentences and repetition of phrases. As a consequence of these factors, several of his geopolitical papers have been translated into Portuguese and Spanish and have then influenced other geopolitical writing in South America.

## **TAMBS' GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS**

Tambs' approach to geopolitical analysis follows earlier American writers such as Spykman and Strausz-Hupé. This emphasises the permanence (or at least longer-run stability) of geographical factors compared with shorter-run, changing, social and economic circumstances. 'Geographical factors' encompass both the physical background of mountains, plains and rivers and the factor of relative location, and technological change can alter the significance of both. These geographical factors provide the context for geopolitical analysis: examining the advantages and disadvantages the geographical context gives to various states, and the opportunities available for far-seeing governments. Tambs is orthodox on this, and, if they can be discerned, the geographical factors are objective. Tambs' work is thus susceptible to all the arguments made about the 'geopolitical gaze' in O' Tuathail's critical analysis (O' Tuathail, 1996). In his various papers Tambs repeatedly resorts (in slightly varying forms) to an expression attributed to Strauss-Hupé (1945, 247): "History passes, but geography remains" (quoted by Tambs, 1974, 45). Thus he writes "Men come and pass but the elements of geography remain forever" (Tambs, 1970b, 80); "Presidents and politicians pass, but geographical imperatives and national aspirations remain (Tambs, 1979a, 17); "A história passa, mas a geografia continua" (Tambs, 1980b, 153).

Like earlier writers such as Spykman and Strauss-Hupé, Tambs' geopolitical analysis should not be read as geographical determinism: there is ample scope for political action, but politicians and governments need to read the geopolitical context, react to potential threats and take advantage of opportunities. Thus, he begins his 'Geopolitics of the Amazon' paper with the quotation from Strauss-Hupé, but immediately continues with:

Nevertheless men - not mountains or rivers, not streams or plains - make history. History and geography are, in turn, influenced by technology. Thus, technology can modify geopolitical relationships (Tambs, 1974, 45),

instancing the Panama Canal, eradication of tropical diseases and the introduction of air and motor transport as major influences on the geopolitics of the Amazon. But he goes further, adding:

Men and land still dominate Latin American geopolitical thinking. Man, however, is paramount, for the sense that geopolitics includes the heroic is shared by most Ibero-American geopoliticians whatever their national origins. (Tambs, 1974, 46)

and concluding the paper:

The Brazilians have proven their excellence in the mastery of space over and over in Amazonia through their indirect methods of conquest..... The issue as to who will emerge as a victory in this race for territory and energy sources through colonization and settlement is as yet not completely clear, but recalling that geopolitics includes and even emphasises heroics, and that men, not mountains or rivers, make history, the odds favor the Brazilians. (Tambs, 1974, 79)

Tambs' geopolitical writing is embedded in a wide use of the English-language geopolitical and political geography literature. His papers include references to Bowman, Cohen, Dorpalen, Goblet, Gyorgy, Kristof, Mackinder (from the 1904 paper to his World War II Foreign Affairs paper), Mahan, Mattern, Spykman, Strauss-Hupé, Van Valkenberg, Walsh, and Whittlesey, as well as to geographical writing on Latin America by Butland, James, Platt and others.

Throughout his papers Tambs argued that Latin America had two great strategic zones: the Caribbean basin and the Bolivian triangle. The northern states of Venezuela, Colombia and the Guianas have historically been isolated from the rest of South America by the Andes and Amazon, and been part of the Caribbean basin. Since 1898 this zone has largely been under US hegemony. Tambs' main geopolitical interest - at this time - lay in the historical competition between Brazil and its Spanish-speaking neighbours, and with the key role of the Bolivian triangle.

Tambs argues that in South America the mountain ranges and river systems have been vital influences on this interstate competition. In particular the Andean cordilleras largely isolated the Pacific Spanish-speaking states from their Amazon

basin territories, whereas Brazilian colonisation penetrated upstream from Belem to the headwaters of the Amazon. Thus Iquitos, in Peru's oriente, was reached from Lima in the 19th century by boat travelling round Cape Horn and up the Amazon-Maranon rivers. Thus also it was Brazilians who, using the Amazon route, exploited the rubber of the Acre region claimed by Bolivia, and ceded to Brazil by treaties in 1867 and 1903 (Tambs, 1966).

## THE NEW HEARTLAND THESIS

The Andes are broken by mountain passes in the Bolivian massif: as Tambs notes the Paso de Santa Rosa leads up from the Pacific to the altiplano and the Puerta del Monte drops to the mid-continental lowlands. In this region the great rivers also have their origin: the major tributaries of the Amazon to the north and east, and those of the Plata to the south-east. To Tambs, these geographical factors make this the continental core area or heartland of South America. The area is that occupied by the former Spanish audiencia of Charcas, and its core is formed by the Bolivian towns of Sucre, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Tambs notes:

This Charcas Heartland, compact, centrally located, rich in resources, temperate in climate, immune from maritime attack, and dominating the headwaters of the continent's two major river systems - the Amazon and La Plata - as well as controlling the direct and diagonal transcontinental routes, fulfils all the classical geopolitical requirements for a pivot area (Tambs, 1965, 34-35).

Several earlier geopolitical writers in Bolivia and Brazil had argued Bolivia's position as the axis, cross-roads or core of South America (e.g. Carlés, 1950; Tosta, 1959) and the Brazilian Travassos had emphasised its significance for Brazil's westward march (Travassos, 1938; Pittman, 1981). Tambs, however, provided a broader-ranging interpretation, one with clear political implications: he encapsulated his ideas about the importance of the Santa Cruz pivot area by paraphrasing Mackinder's classic summary of his heartland thesis. Mackinder wrote

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World Island command the World  
(Mackinder, 1919, 150)

Tambs' South American version ran:

Who rules Santa Cruz commands Charcas.  
Who rules Charcas commands the heartland.  
Who rules the Heartland commands South America

In the pre-Colombian Aymara and Inca empires, and later under the Spanish empire, the altiplano and Charcas were such power centres. "Upper Peru remained the nerve center of Spanish power in South America to the end of empire" (Tambs, 1965, 37). It

was the last redoubt to fall to Bolivar and the independence movement, a final conquest Tambs has documented (Tambs, 1970b). But this dominance was in the era of four-legged land-transport, the world of the llama and the horse, rather than river steamboat and the railway. After independence

..the rimland closed in upon Charcas from the periphery. The tide had turned. Under leaderless Bolivia the heartland would no longer act. It would be acted upon.

Viewed as a struggle for the Charcas heartland the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century South America, except for its northern shoulder, becomes intelligible (Tambs, 1965, 37-38).

Tambs then traces this process of penetration - of Argentine pushes up the Plata basin, to dominate Paraguay and parts of Bolivia, of the Brazilian colonisation of the Amazon headwaters, and the Chilean conquest of Bolivia's outlet to the sea in the 1879 War of the Pacific.

...Bolivia was dying the death of a thousand cuts, and its leaders, though they had the heartland, did not have the head to stop the haemorrhaging. The geopolitical concept of the organic nature of the state declares that the 'decay of every state is the result of declining space conception' [Ratzel], and space conception is precisely what the directors of the destinies of independent Upper Peru lacked (Tambs, 1965, 45).

Tambs, writing in 1965, viewed the future domination of the Heartland as still in the balance, but with the odds favouring Brazil rather than Argentina. Brazilian settlers were continuing to colonise Bolivian territory, but Tambs saw the establishment of Brasilia as the new Brazilian capital as more significant - "Long torn between the influences of the Atlantic and the heartland, Brazil has opted for the continent" (Tambs, 1965, 43). Amazonia's 'hollow frontier' - 'archipelagic Brazil' in Golbery's phrase - would be occupied, and Brazil probably move to continental dominance.

Through his sequence of papers between 1965 and 1975 Lewis Tambs explored various detailed facets of his geopolitical interpretation of Latin American history. Two versions had an unusual destination - the *Zeitschrift fur Geopolitik*, the German geopolitical journal founded by Karl Haushofer and others in 1924. This had ceased publication in wartime 1944, but it had been restarted 1951 as a conservative, international affairs journal and survived until 1968 (see Schnitzer (1954) for an analysis of the early years of this revival). A version of his Charcas Heartland thesis appeared in the *Zeitschrift* (Tambs, 1965b) and a paper on Brazil's March to the West in the very last volume of the journal (Tambs, 1968). Versions of the Heartland thesis were also translated and published in Bolivia, and his 1974 Amazon paper (which traces Brazilian expansion there in considerable detail) also appeared (in Spanish) in an Argentine geopolitical journal (Tambs, 1977b).

Tambs' work was the first English-language writer to discover and explore the Latin American geopolitical literature, and although it is Child's later work that is now the principal point of reference to this Latin American literature, it was Tambs'



1965 paper and his own later work, that opened up the door on this massive literature, as Child acknowledged in his 1979 paper (Child, 1979). Tambs himself collected together and published an extensive bibliography of this work (Tambs, 1970b).

## TAMBS' CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICS

Up to the mid-1970s Tambs' geopolitical writing was primarily historical, but since then he has focused on contemporary issues, usually drawing very explicit political conclusions. Some of Tambs' politics and his contemporary concerns do show through in his earlier work, but they are not central. In fact, Tambs' conservative, strongly anti-communist standpoint is revealed by his very first paper, on the 'decada roja' [red decade] in Guatemala 1944-1954 (Tambs, 1964). And his historical papers sometimes contain brief political comment, as in his intriguing study of an abortive Anglo-Russian plan in the 1730s to set up a base on the southern Brazilian coast (Tambs, 1971), which ends with the words:

The Russian government's effort to establish an entropôt on the shore of South America.... was almost foredoomed to failure. It was eccentric to the traditional thrust of Russian expansion. The attractions of the Pacific and the Black Sea were overpowering, and eventually won out, bringing the Brazilian project to nought. Nevertheless, the South American chimera of Anna Ivanova and Osterman, inspired though it may have been by Courland's Caribbean interests, remains more than a casual example of imperial ambition. It is also an early indication of a desire that the fledgling Russian fleet should operate on the high seas of the South Atlantic (Tambs, 1971, 372).

This paper led him to study the history of the Russian navy and Russian expansionism, and may have influenced his more contemporary views of Soviet policies. More directly contemporary was a conclusion to his 1965 "Geopolitical Factors" paper:

Soviet occupation of Cuba has shaken, but not yet broken, yanqui hegemony in the "New World Mediterranean" and it may be that having gained the key to the Caribbean the Communists will concentrate their efforts on winning the key to South America: Bolivia. (Tambs, 1965a, 49)

Thus neither the political standpoint nor the contemporary comment represent a change of heart after 1975. Rather they seem to represent a response to what Tambs identified as political threats and policy disasters during the 1970s. These were the years of defeat in Vietnam, Watergate, US embargoes on the military regimes in Chile and Argentina, and the Carter policy of detente. In the latter years of the decade, the conservative wing of the Republican party began to construct a new agenda in both foreign and economic policy, and the conservatism associated with Senator Barry Goldwater began to see new vitality under the challenge of Reagan to Carter in the 1980 election. This is the context for Tambs' later work.

The best place to see Tambs' analysis is his revisitation of his 1965 work in "The changing geopolitical balance of South America" (Tambs, 1979a), versions of which also appeared in Brazil (Tambs, 1979c) and in the Spanish-language, international geopolitical journal *Geosur* edited in Uruguay (Tambs, 1979b). Here Tambs noted how his prediction about communist attempts on the Charcas Heartland were proven correct: Che Guevara, Castro's fellow-revolutionary in the Cuban revolution, had moved on from Cuba to attempt to create a peasant revolution or foco in the Charcas, but was destroyed by Bolivian-Brazilian cooperation in 1967.

As predicted in the original presentation, the Communists ... subsequently sought to seize the axis of the Americas. Concentrating at Camiri Ernesto "Che" Guevara launched a campaign to conquer Charcas; but while his strategy seemed sound, his efforts nevertheless failed. Bolivian nationalism frustrated Guevara's guerrillas, and he paid the price of defeat. (Tambs, 1979a, 17)

[An alternative view is that Guevara chose the Charcas partly because of his concerns for the landless peasants of Bolivia and partly because its location facilitated escape across various international boundaries.] Tambs then continues:

Since then [1967], although geography influences policies and peoples, it has become clear that only men make history, and the scene in Latin America has changed dramatically. (Tambs, 1979a, 17)

Amongst the changes he identified, Tambs contrasted the American-supported rapid Brazilian growth and development of the Amazon under military (geopolitician) rule after 1964 with the relative decline of Argentina. He charted the way Brazil has continued to draw not just Bolivia but also much of the trade of the Upper Plata basin into its orbit (with export corridors to Brazilian deep-water ports rather than Buenos Aires). Argentina was being forced to concede Brazilian hegemony to the north, and had begun to construct a new sea-oriented "Southern Project" (culminating in the Falklands/Malvinas War of 1982). Even Venezuela and the Andean Pact countries were drawn into the Brazilian orbit through the 1978 Amazon Treaty. Tambs argued that by 1979 the race for the Heartland and continental dominance was firmly in Brazil's grasp.

However he argues that these 'internal' changes have been accompanied by dramatic 'external' impacts. The two vital threads here are Soviet communist interventions and the collapse of the American-Brazilian alliance.

Tambs here enters debates on global geopolitics, asserting that nuclear stalemate and parity allowed classical geopolitical doctrines to operate on the ground. He asserts that containment doctrine was too defensive, and also not applied firmly: the Soviets, and especially Admiral Gorshkov, had studied their Mackinders and Mahans and had broken through any rimland-containment:

The holders of the Eurasian Heartland would challenge the Oceanic Peoples of the Inner and Insular Crescents of the Mackinder-Kennan thesis. Construction of a high seas fleet and control of the

globe's sea lands became a prime objective of Soviet policy (Tambs, 1979a, 20)

The new high-seas power of the Soviet fleet enabled them to project power in the classic Mahan-fashion, allowing interventions world wide: Cuba in the 1962 missile crisis, Guinea, Mozambique, Angola, as well as threatening vital "choke points" and SLOCs (Sea Lanes of Communication). In these, and arguments about falling dominoes in South East Asia, Tambs' anti-Soviet geopolitics parallels the arguments of Gray and others. What Tambs brings new to the analysis is his concern with Soviet interference in Latin America. Here he sees the hands of the Soviet geopolitical chess-players behind each of the "leftist" revolutions and power-switches in Latin America: Cuba, then the abortive Dominican revolution (put down by a US-Brazilian taskforce in 1965 with over 2,000 marines involved) threatening the oil route from Venezuela through the Mona Passage, threats in Guevara's Charcas, Allende's Chile, and the Uruguayan Tupamaros guerrillas.

Many threats had been resisted, but Tambs argues that by the late 1970s American resolve was crumbling, and the US-Brazilian alliance collapsed in 1977 as the Brazilians rejected US aid because of US interference in internal affairs, i.e. the Carter regime's insistence on linking the aid to reports on human rights, and insistence also applied to Argentina and Chile. To Tambs, US retreat meant Brazil was having to assert its own role in areas previously left to the USA, notably the Caribbean basin and potential threats to Northern Brazil.

The close geopolitical and security relationship between the USA and Brazil had been greatly valued within Brazil, and notably in the military-geopolitical establishment. Both the leading military geopoliticians (Generals Golbery and Meira Mattos) had, as young officers, fought alongside US officers against the Germans in Italy in 1944-45, and American contacts created then now held important positions in the US establishment. In addition, Meira Mattos had led the Latin American contingent in the 1965 Dominican taskforce (Kelly, 1984). They and other leading Brazilian figures firmly saw their Brazilian policies are a component in a wider US-led resistance to communist unrest and subversion (Hepple, 1986).

Tambs viewed American policy on the Panama Canal as a special disaster, and it may be that this was pivotal in switching his geopolitical analysis to contemporary problems. He viewed the Canal as vital to US economic and strategic interests, and was strongly opposed to the handing over of control to the Torrijos Panamanian regime, seeing a risk of potential indirect Soviet control. In another paper, published in Brazil, he examined the Canal issue at length (Tambs, 1979b), arguing that Soviet geopolitical writers since 1949 had recognised the geostrategic value of the Canal. He cited the Soviet Admiral Gorshkov, and Semenov's study of geopolitics where the geostrategic importance of the Canal was emphasised (Semenov, 1949). Tambs' fears about US "withdrawal to Fortress America" were reinforced by the US government's (initial) approval for the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 and the policies towards civil war in El Salvador.

Tambs' post-1979 writings are mainly short, more journalistic pieces, but his *Geosur* paper on the Caribbean brought together his key views (Tambs, 1981). It begins: "The

Third World War is coming to a climax in East Asia and in the Caribbean". Attempts through detente - and through earlier US policies of accommodation - to "socialise the Soviets" have simply given the Soviets time and opportunity to develop nuclear and naval parity. Tambs focused on the importance of the Caribbean for US oil, with Alaska and Ecuadorean oil coming through Panama and Venezuelan and Middle East oil having to pass through narrow choke-points (interestingly his map highlights the key location of Grenada). The Caribbean had been an "American Lake":

Today it has been turned into a Socialist Sea" (Tambs, 1981, 29), and he identified 'socialist-leftist' regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Guyana and the islands of Jamaica, Dominica, St. Lucia and Grenada. "In Panama as in El Salvador, the question of a pro-Castro form of government is not 'if' but 'when' (Tambs, 1981, 30).

## **THE REAGANITE NEW RIGHT**

Tambs' geopolitical writings take on a wider significance because of his growing political role in the late 1970s, developing influence in the New Right and promoting his perspective for US foreign policy. These were the years when conservative Republicans - mainly based on the Pacific coast or in the south-western states, rather than in Washington or the 'old establishment' East - began to construct a new agenda, one that came to have a focus around Reagan's bid for the Presidency and then in the Administration itself. This shift in the centre of gravity of the Republican party - both in electoral support and political influence, which do not necessarily go hand-in-hand - also generated a marked movement in the geopolitical scripting of Republican foreign policy, a change in which Tambs played an important part. The role of such individuals and policy think-tanks in Republican geopolitics has been noted by Crampton and O' Tuathail (1996) for an earlier period (the 1950s) in terms of the work of Strauss-Hupé and the FPRI (Foreign Policy Research Institute), and Tambs and the Council for Inter-American Security played such a role in the late 1970s.

Tambs' identification with this new conservative agenda was publicly heralded by his testimony in October 1977 before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations during the Panama Canal hearings (Tambs, 1977). Here he argued the strategic case for retaining US control of the Canal, fearing the Canal would end up in communist hands. Conservative congressmen had selections of his papers printed in the Congressional Record: Senator Barry Goldwater with Tambs' "Changing Geopolitical Balance" paper (Tambs, 1979e) and Representative Gerald Solomon with Tambs' short paper on Soviet penetration of the Caribbean (Tambs, 1980c). During 1979-81 Tambs also wrote several short pieces on the Soviet threat and the crisis in the Caribbean, and these were published in different forms in a variety of places: *ANALYSIS* (the journal of Arizonans for National Security), the *Sunday Omaha World-Herald*, the *Saturday Magazine/Scottsdale Progress*, *The Arizona Legionnaire*, and the *National Security Record*.

Tambs himself became President of Arizonans for National Security in 1978-81, but most significant was his involvement with the national conservative strategy group the Council for Inter-American Security, based in Washington DC. Tambs became a member of the Board of Directors of CIS in 1980. CIS had the objective of both warning about strategic dangers in the American hemisphere and also constructing a positive hemispheric strategy for the United States. A group who became known as the 'Committee of Santa Fe' produced such a document as *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*. The contributors were Lewis Tambs, Francis Bouchey, David Jordan, Roger Fontaine and Gordon Sumner, but Tambs was the editor and the main contributor (Tambs, 1980a) and his geopolitical ideas and punchy style ran through the report.

The Santa Fe Report is much quoted as a key New Right policy statement, both by supporters and opponents of the Reagan regime's policies. The key message is that "global chess" with the Soviets was the real issue, and Cold War geopolitics had to take priority over issues of social and economic reform in Latin America, for nationalistic reform movements were used by the Soviets and the 'retreat' of the Carter years had to be reversed:

Containment of the Soviet Union is not enough. Detente is dead....for World War III .. is almost over... Latin America and Southern Asia are the scenes of strife of the third phase of World War III (Tambs, 1980a, 1).

America is everywhere in retreat... Even the Caribbean, America's maritime crossroad and petroleum refining center, is becoming a Marxist-Leninist lake. Never before has the Republic been in such jeopardy from its exposed southern flank. Never before has American foreign policy abused, abandoned, and betrayed its allies to the south in Latin America (Tambs, 1980a, 2)

...Carter's Ibero-American policies... are the culmination of this accommodation process whereby Latin America is excluded from U.S. strategic concerns and independent Latin American regimes are abandoned to the extracontinental attacks by the international Communist movement (Tambs, 1980a, 6)

The Committee of Santa Fe contends that U.S. foreign policy is in disarray; that the norms of conflict and social change adopted by the Carter administration are those of the Soviet Union; that the area in contention is the sovereign territory of U.S. allies and Third World trading partners; that the sphere of the Soviet Union and its surrogates is expanding; and that the annual balance sheet of gains and losses favors the USSR (Tambs, 1980a, 9)

[interventionist human rights policy] must be abandoned and replaced by a non-interventionist policy of political and ethical realism. It has cost the United States friends and allies and lost us influence....The reality of the situations confronted by Latin American governments

that are under attack.. must be understood not just as a threat to some alleged oligarchy, but as a threat to the security interests of the United States (Tambs, 1980a, 20-21)

## **THE REAGAN YEARS**

With the advent of the Reagan administration, the Conservative Republicans had potentially a very influential policy role. Reagan himself reflected both the new conservatism and the West Coast focus on the American hemisphere, rather than the East Coast interest in the Atlantic and Europe. This potential influence took two forms: the injection of New Right ideas into American policy, and the injection of New Right individuals into important government positions. However, within the Reagan administration there were always tensions between these ideas and individuals - who predominantly were 'outsiders' to Washington - and the policies and personnel of the traditional, Washington-focused Republican establishment. In particular there was tension between the State Department, initially under Haig, and the more conservative staffing and views of the National Security Council (NSC). See Pastor (1987), Rubin (1984), and Lowenthal (1983). Within the administration there were thus differences over both the priority to be given to geopolitical interpretations of world affairs, and over the role of Latin America in such interpretations.

An initial clash was over the important position of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Haig nominated the Thomas Enders, an experienced diplomat. Senator Jesse Helms, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, blocked his confirmation for several months, hoping to get one of the New Right installed and Tambs was actually Helm's candidate for the post. Helms failed on this, but three of the Santa Fe Commission subsequently entered the administration: Sumner became a consultant at State, and Fontaine and Tambs joined the NSC, Tambs in 1982 (Rubin, 1984). Helms in fact argued for Tambs as Ambassador to Panama, but Tambs' stance over the Canal issue made him unacceptable and "his suggested appointment caused a great commotion in Panamanian newspapers" (Furlong and Scranton, 1984, 198). Jeanne Kirkpatrick as UN ambassador also represented New Right views on Latin America, which had been expressed in her influential essays in *Commentary* (Kirkpatrick, 1979, 1981), though she herself was not part of the West Coast Republicans.

In 1983 Tambs became Ambassador to Colombia, and in 1985 Ambassador to Costa Rica. From a US-perspective these were very important posts. Colombia is the major drugs-trafficking source for the USA, and US influence to destroy this traffic is vital. Tambs was a controversial figure and his appointment did not go unchallenged: some Democrat Senators were concerned at "his lack of diplomatic experience" and argued "it would be a mistake to send as our representative a man with a preference for military rather than diplomatic solutions in the region" (Senate, Record, 1983). However, unlike the earlier contest with Enders, this time Tambs won through and was confirmed by 73 to 20, with all Republicans and a majority of Democrats supporting him. Once in Colombia Tambs led an initiative to attack the drugs barons, and these cocaine barons apparently offered a \$1 million bounty for the killing of Tambs (Honey, 1986). In 1985 Tambs transferred to Costa Rica, the only real

democracy in Central America and important in the 1980s as the southern flank of Sandinista Nicaragua. Here there were political tensions about US support for the Nicaraguan Contras: the neutralist Costa Rican regime officially opposed any local involvement, but gave some tacit approval of US-Contra activities on its northern border. During 1983-85 the embassy had been greatly expanded (from 35 to 150), but shortly after Tamb's arrival, a new, less sympathetic government came into office. In 1987 accusations were made that Tambs was assisting covert operations by Oliver North and the CIA and helping to set up a secret airstrip (Dunkerley, 1988). Later in 1987 Tambs decided to leave the administration and return to academic life at Arizona State University. He testified at length to the Congressional Iran-Contra Investigation (Tambs, 1987a). His general political stance, coupled with his role in Costa Rica, has led to him being included in student guides to right-wing activists in universities, which portray him as one of the last of the Cold War Warriors (see Massachi and Cowan, 1994; entry on Tambs by G. Nigh).

After leaving the US administration Tambs continued to develop ideas on Latin American policy, publishing these in conservative and policy-oriented journals (Tambs, 1987a; Tambs, 1992; Tambs, 1997). By 1987 he was able to claim the Reagan years had seen a reversal of the Soviet tide in many parts of the world (Tambs, 1987a). Back in 1979 the situation had been very threatening in Tambs' main sphere of interest, the Caribbean and Latin America:

the possible triad of air and naval bases on Grenada, Cuba, and Nicaragua portended the driving of a wedge from east to west across the Caribbean, that American Mediterranean, in a 20th century repetition by the Soviets of 17th century England's 'Grand Design' against Spain (Tambs, 1987a, 81).

However,

President Reagan's actions in October 1983 liberating Grenada broke the ring of the Soviet strategy to encircle the Caribbean with tactical air and naval power (Tambs, 1987a, 82).

Nevertheless, the threats of Cuba and Nicaragua remained. Tambs argued that

Marxist/Leninist Nicaragua preaches the doctrine of revolution without frontiers. The Nine Comandantes there are committed to exporting subversion as evidenced by their efforts in El Salvador and Honduras. The Sandinistas are also exporting people (Tambs, 1987a, 82).

The flight of refugees from Nicaragua and other countries affected by civil war, with possible implications for Mexico also, could have serious consequences for the United States itself:

there exists the possibility that the U. S. could be confronted in a relatively short period of time with a human wave of some *ten million* refugees (Tambs, 1987a, 83).

The US could then face what Ambassador William Middendorf termed 'Operation Checkmate', with the untenable choice of admitting the masses of refugees, with resultant destabilisation, or sealing the border with dire human consequences.

These apocalyptic fears subsided with the collapse of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union itself, and the end of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua, all seen by American conservatives as evidence of the success of Reaganite policies. The 1980s' experience, however, led to two new themes in Tambs' writings during the 1990s. The first was his recognition of the importance of demography in geopolitics, flowing directly from the analysis of Operation Checkmate (Tambs, personal communication, 1 September 1998), and the second, flowing from his experiences in Colombia, was the role of non-governmental narco-terrorism.

Tambs' demographic argument is based on well-known facts about international population trends but his case is that the geopolitical implications of these trends have not been recognised sufficiently. In the Western Hemisphere, the Latin American population, approximately equal to the US population in 1950 at 150 million, now stands at some 497 million as against 273 million. In Europe and Russia, lower indigenous fertility was accompanied by a growing percentage of immigrants from more rapidly reproducing regions. By contrast the Muslim regions, together with China, have rapidly growing populations. Tambs' 1997 paper relates these trends to classical geopolitical ideas, suggesting that

the current occupants of Eurasia - Land and Sea People alike - are under pressure from the Eastern and southern Rimlands. Overseas extensions of European Sea People, like the United States, are also under siege from the south (Tambs, 1997, 68-9).

He concludes

Thus, population pressures, possession of petroleum and profits from drug dealing push geopolitics and, as Oswald Spengler predicted in 1918, we witness the end of the financial phase of European history as the over-urbanized Sea Peoples pursue wealth and self, leading to the *Decline of the West* (Tambs, 1997, 71).

Moving from this scale of global speculation, Tambs' specific policy recommendations focus, as always, on the Western Hemisphere and the US relationship with Latin America, arguing that the US needs to more fully recognise the strength and aspirations of Latin American states and work with them to build liberal democracies (Tambs, 1992, 1997).

This analysis needs to be linked to Tambs' second theme of narco-terrorism. Tambs was in Colombia when the drugs barons were rapidly expanding their operations, and he argues that guerrilla and revolutionary groups of FARC and ELN are part of the drug-trafficking system. The network has extended its tentacles across the Caribbean and Central America, with links to the Cuban and other regimes, and



provides a major threat to the US. Tambs identifies these and other terrorist groupings as the major threat to the state-system, suggesting that

the world is retrogressing to a pre-modern era prior to the formation of the nation-state which the West pioneered. Hence, if the nation-state is disintegrating, the West's instrument of global order - the United Nations - may also be in jeopardy (Tambs, 1997, 70).

In policy terms Tambs' arguments are brought together in revised editions of the Santa Fe Report. That 1980 document was revised and updated in Santa Fe II and Santa Fe III (1994), but it is *Santa Fe IV* (Sumner and Tambs, 2000) that reflects Tambs' current analysis.

The study is organised around the 'Ds' of defence, drugs, demography, debt, deindustrialization, democratic post-cold-war popularism, destabilization and deforestation. The study argues that hemispheric relationships have been neglected with "South America on the backshelf": "the United States persists in taking them [the Latin American states] for granted or ignoring them completely". Narco-terrorism is central:

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Castro was left without a patron. This void has since been filled by the drug lords of South America, particularly the paramilitary Revolutionary Armed forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) of Colombia (Sumner and Tambs, 2000, 10).

However the US has not supported forceful counter-action:

Whenever a duly elected government tries to protect itself from an insurgency that is clearly supported by drugs, and with a leftist ideology that is supported by Communist Cuba, it often finds itself under attack by the State Department as well as the liberal U.S. media (Sumner and Tambs, 2000, 10).

But economic problems linked to demography, debt and poverty needed also to be priorities for US policy. NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) had worked for the multinational corporations, but not for the peoples of the countries, including the USA: earlier initiatives (such as the Caribbean Basin Initiative, or CBI, of 1982) took US entrepreneurs into employment-creation there:

But NAFTA changed all this. Abandoning the CBI for even cheaper labor and proximity to the U.S. market, U.S. and East Asian investors moved their garment, textile and microchip operations to the maquiladoras of Mexico, which initially were supposed to be distributed across the entire Republic of Mexico but have come to be concentrated under non-Mexican management along the frontier from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean (Sumner and Tambs, 2000, 14),

creating poverty elsewhere and migration pressures along the US border. *Santa Fe IV* does not provide detailed remedies for the various economic and social problems, but it does argue that globalising, free-market policies cannot replace closer US involvement with Latin America.

The timing of *Santa Fe IV* may have been propitious, appearing in the same year that George W. Bush was elected to the Presidency, though the report does not seem to have generated widespread debate (see however, Lucier, 2000). Tambs and his colleagues have not been enthusiasts for US foreign policy in most of the years since Reagan. Not unnaturally they looked unfavourably on the Clinton years, but George Bush Senior's Presidency also had its problems. Tambs has been critical of Bush's advocacy of a 'New World Order' which

envisioned a world without war in which international outlaws like Panama, Iraq and Serbia would be disciplined by United Nations peace-keeping forces according to rules governed by situation ethics, resource requirements and investment opportunities (Tambs, 1992, 59).

Tambs argued for a more honest *realpolitik* position, to recognise rivalries, tensions and power interests. He was also one of the few who saw the unfortunate ancestry of the term 'New World Order' in the Nazi geopolitics of the 'Neuweltordnung'. Unsurprisingly, in the 1995/96 Republican nominations Tambs supported Pat Buchanan and his endorsement was circulated by the Buchanan network. George W. Bush came to power with a more conservative outlook and agenda than his father, a context within which Tambs and colleagues may expect their arguments to carry more weight.

Tambs himself remains an unrepentant member of the New Right. As well as his political involvement, Tambs also acts as a consultant to the Aura Corporation as a

design specialist for creation of government initiatives, diplomatic negotiations, policies for counteracting the production and expansion of illicit drug operations (Aura website, February 2002: [www.aura1.com/ltambs.html](http://www.aura1.com/ltambs.html)).

## REASSESSING TAMBS' CONTRIBUTION TO US GEOPOLITICS

The arguments put forward by Tambs and CIS (Council for Inter-American Security) in *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties* were controversial when they were put forward, and any assessment of their geopolitical script will also be controversial. Any serious assessment of Tambs' views and political contribution must be part of a wider assessment of US history at that time, which cannot be attempted here. The major aim of the present study is to ensure that Tambs and the Latin American dimension are not omitted from any such broader assessment of US foreign policy and geopolitics.

There are, however, some specific issues about the geopolitical scripting that might be made here. As put forward in *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties*, the script assumed a Soviet global expansionist strategy and one that was targeted on Latin America, together with a very binary USA-USSR geopolitical competition. The latter point was emphasised by the metaphor of the chess game. Bouchey argued whether Reagan's policy was one of global chess against the USSR (the correct perspective from CIS viewpoint) or one of 'local crap shooting' (Bouchey, 1983), and Tambs used the metaphor in his paper "How Brazil plays geopolitical chess" (Tambs, 1979d). The problem with the chess metaphor is that chess has only two players and all the pieces must belong to one side of the other. As Reaganite rhetoric it worked well (and Reagan regularly employed expressions used in CIS documents), but as a basis for policy it oversimplified.

Most of those writing from a critical geopolitics perspective are unsympathetic to the directions of US foreign policy, and there may be a temptation to dismiss the CIS argument as a fantasy. However, although the detailed and documented evidence on Soviet policy towards Latin America rejects a simple picture of a centrally-directed, long-term and specific strategy, but it does support the existence of a general strategy of limiting direct Soviet commitment but taking full advantage of any tactical opportunities to damage US influence (e.g. Bark, 1986; Fukayama, 1986; Leiken, 1982; Molineu, 1986; Wiarda, 1987). This accepts the Soviet threat in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America as a real one, but forces a more complex assessment than CIS policy and the chess metaphor allow.

Strong advocates of a geopolitical basis for foreign policy are often reacting against a neglect of geopolitical factors and geographical context in existing (or rival) foreign policy scripts. However, they then tend to elevate and exaggerate those geographical factors so that they become the all-important and sole factors. The arguments of Tambs and the CIS tend to do this: the internal dynamics of states (in terms of politics, economy and social structure) get filtered out of the analysis, as do the roles and significance of regional geopolitical actors. Tambs' earlier and lengthier analyses are certainly not open to the latter criticism, for his focus is on the regional actions of states such as Brazil, Argentina or Bolivia, but the Reaganite political version became very simplified into a binary USA-USSR conflict. Nor did Tambs' earlier geopolitical analyses give much attention to the salience of socio-economic issues in the Latin American states (and this is a characteristic limitation of traditional geopolitical writing). Such simplification and neglect may work as short-term *rhetoric* and be very effective in forcing recognition of potential dangers, but in the longer-term it tends to work against its own goals: effective geopolitics requires a closer (and more complicated) fusing of geographical context with the other social, economic and political aspects of the situation (in this case the states of Latin America). As Molineu puts it, "U.S. interests may not be well protected if critical local or indigenous factors are overlooked" (Molineu, 1986, 207).

How do these comments work through Tambs more recent analyses and that of *Santa Fe IV*? These studies do integrate the geopolitical analysis more closely with the social, economic and political context of the Latin American states, as they had to after the simple binary of USA-USSR had disappeared. But Tambs remains a 'big picture' analyst, determined that the larger-scale patterns he discerns should not be

occluded by more regional or local detail. Whilst there are important economic policy arguments in *Santa Fe IV*, the war against narco-terrorism is central and replaces the war against communism. Again, some liberal critics will argue that Tambs oversimplifies the relationships between leftist groups and the drugs barons and that, by conflating the two, he advocates policies that will exacerbate the problem rather than solve it. What is certain is that the George W. Bush Presidency came into office with a determination to focus more on hemispheric priorities, as against the global negotiating of the Clinton years, with Colombia and narco-terrorism high on the agenda. But September 11 forced a change of scale and theatre, away from Latin America towards a wider war against terrorism.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper has set out to chart Tambs' geopolitical writings, both historical and contemporary, and his wider impact. Tambs is a significant figure in a number of ways. Uncontroversially his writings undoubtedly played an important role in making the English-speaking academic community aware of the enormous Latin American geopolitical literature, and his own analyses have been a significant and influential contribution to that literature. His Charcas Heartland thesis and analysis of Luso-Hispanic rivalries have entered the South American thinking on geopolitics. Tambs' direct policy impact is more controversial, but he has undoubtedly been one of the key figures in a re-scripting of geopolitics on the U.S. New Right, both emphasising the priority that Latin America should have in U.S. global foreign policy, and linking the analysis to the formal geopolitical traditions. The ending of the Cold War removed the 'global danger' that Tambs feared, but his post-1990 Latin American analyses have emphasised the new problems of terrorism and non-state violence, notably through narco-terrorism, and September 11 confirms the relevance of this perspective. Any account and analysis of US geopolitics should recognise his contribution to geopolitical thinking in the last twenty years.

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