

China in Latin America: A Contemporary Story

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In Americans' minds, China's rise to economic superpower status may evoke images of economic influence in Asian or African countries, or just the amount of U.S. dollar reserves the Chinese Government holds. But what happens when China quietly steps into America's pre-eminent geographical sphere of influence and dominion: Latin America? After all, when was the last (first) time that you heard that a U.S. president visited a Latin American country to increase American exports to the region and create jobs at home? The answers to these questions lie within a careful analysis of the U.S. relationship with Latin America and the implications that a Chinese economic and diplomatic takeover of the region may have for the U.S. as the pre-eminent superpower in the Western Hemisphere and the world.

To the surprise of many Americans, President Obama visited Brazil in early spring 2011 to achieve these two goals—increase American exports to Latin America and, thereby, create jobs in the U.S. The economic decline of the U.S. and its political decline in the region and America's need for increased exports and jobs, the new and, arguably, the economic rise of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) have caused a historic shift in the relationship between America and Latin American countries. Notwithstanding the merits of Brazil's rise to quasi-economic superpower status the best compelling reason for reasserting America's lost influence in Latin America is PRC's rising influence in the region. America can recover much of its lost influence and thrive in Latin America, even if other economic superpowers exercise their influence in the region. The U.S. needs to start a new and open dialogue with the countries of the region and offer it military and economic aid with more favorable terms than the aid provided by PRC to the region.

According to Fareed Zakaria, one of the most influential public intellectuals of his generation and the editor of Newsweek International, this generation (the Millennials or Generation Y as some would call it) will know a "Post-American world," which means a "world [where] the United States is [no longer] the director of all that happens." The indicators of this shift in the playing field of global politics and economics are apparent. For instance, while the U.S. has faced the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression over the past three years, PRC's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at over nine percent per year, according to statistics from the World Bank (2010). A world dominated by multiple superpowers—a multipolar world—is at hand and Latin America is not absent from being affected by such a world.

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The Importance of Latin America and U.S. History of Involvement in the Region

The U.S. has exercised significant influence in the Latin American region for much of the last two centuries. However, during the past two centuries, the U.S. has been linked to coups and military interventions in more than half a dozen countries in the region. For instance, the U.S. has established its military presence or has been linked to military coups in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela. All of these interventions into the internal affairs of these countries have had one thing in common: They were meant to protect U.S. interests. This has resulted in these countries' distrust of U.S. intentions in the region.

Several of the region's demagogues, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Fidel & Raul Castro, have exploited this distrust and used it to blame the U.S. for everything that goes wrong in the region. Of course, these demagogues' goal is to distract their people from the real problems facing their countries and the promises they have not been able to deliver. As Peter Hakim—the President of the Inter-American Dialogue, the leading Washington, DC think tank on western hemisphere affairs—states, “The United States is not the only culprit, however. Most Latin American governments have only partially completed the political and economic reforms needed to sustain robust growth and healthy democratic institutions” (Hakim, 2006).

Yet, despite the distrust and the region's demagogues' exploitation of it, the U.S. continues to be the most important trade partner of all Latin American countries. In fact, the U.S. has signed free trade agreements with the Dominican Republic and all of the Central American countries (DR-CAFTA), Mexico, Chile, and Peru. According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the U.S. has also signed free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama, but the Obama Administration has not yet submitted them for Senate approval. In any event, in 2009, the volume of trade between the U.S. and Latin American countries (excluding Mexico) amounted to 8.3 percent of America's total annual trade of more than \$200 billion dollars a year, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service (Hornbeck, 2011).

Furthermore, the U.S. continues to be the primary destination for migrants of the region—linking the U.S. more to its pre-eminent sphere of power. Even though a growing number of the region's migrants have left for Europe, especially Spain, the U.S. continues to be the largest recipient of migrants from the region, not only due to its geographical proximity, but also because of the history of immigration from the region and the U.S. immigration policies favoring family reunification (Monger, & Yankay, 2010). According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in 2010 alone close to two-thirds of all the new legal immigrants to the U.S. were granted legal permanent resident status to the U.S. based on a family relationship with a U.S. citizen or a legal permanent resident (Monger, & Yankay, 2010). In 2010, approximately twenty-six (26) percent of all the legal immigrants admitted to the United States came from Latin America, excluding the legal immigrants from Mexico who represent a significant portion of the U.S. legal immigrant population (Monger, & Yankay, 2010). Excluding the number of illegal immigrants coming to the U.S. from Latin America every year and for whom it may be difficult to account, it is clear that Latin American migration to the U.S. continues to represent a large percentage of the U.S. legal immigrant population.

But why is Latin America so important to the U.S.? Why is it that losing Latin America to another superpower could be a detriment to the U.S. and its interests? Why should Americans care about the region? Of course, they should care. It is the where the U.S. should be focusing its efforts—in winning the hearts and minds of Latin Americans, the pre-eminent region of influence.

First of all, unlike in previous decades, when the region experienced long periods of hyperinflation, Latin America is no longer a region in economic crisis. In fact, it is a region in constant economic progress. In 2009, for instance, at least four Latin American countries ranked among the top 30 economies in the world in terms of gross domestic product (the amount of goods and services produced by a country during a year), according to the World Bank. Brazil, for instance, ranks as the 8th largest economy of the world, while Mexico and Argentina rank as the top 14th and 30th economies respectively (World Bank, 2010). In addition to these indicators, the region has experienced continuous GDP growth in the recent years of turmoil the world economy has undergone. From 2004 to 2010, the Latin American region's economies as a whole grew at an average pace of 4 percent, and it is predicted that it will continue to grow at below 3 percent (Froymovich, 2010). As Gabriel Torres, an economist for Moody's, the credit rating agency, "Latin America did very well in this [economic] crisis, better than we would have expected." (Froymovich, 2010).

The Cuban Missile Crisis sheds light to the continuing strategic importance of Latin America for the U.S. In 1962, the U.S. imposed a blockaded to all shipments to Cuba because the Soviets had placed nuclear weapons less than 100 miles from the U.S. The issue is what would happen if the Chinese decide to negotiate with Latin American countries, many of which are governed by regimes with political ideologies that may be inconsistent with U.S. style democracy, and place some of their nuclear weapons within close reach to the U.S. Mainland? What would happen in such a case? No geopolitical strategist in his right mind can argue that allowing another superpower to exercise military and economic influence in the western hemisphere would neither have policy implications, nor constitute a threat to the U.S. Geography has not changed (and may never do during our lifetime) and what happened fifty years ago can occur today and with greater implications. Does this suggest the end of the old Monroe doctrine.. The Monroe Doctrine issued by President James Monroe in 1823 held that America was off limits to any European power. As Antonio C. Hsiang, an Associate Professor at the Chihlee Institute of Technology in Taiwan, states, "The geo-strategic implications of this development are broad: China's presence in the region not only has serious impacts on the U.S.'s role in its 'backyard,' it has consequences for the security situation in the Taiwan Strait" (Hsiang, 2009).

But what about U.S. influence in other regions of the world? Would anything change because of PRC's involvement in Latin America? Would PRC's involvement in Latin America eventually force the U.S. to retreat from Asia in terms of its military presence and reduce its protection of Taiwan? That might be is a good question for geopolitical strategists. Denis C. Blair, the former U.S. Director of National Intelligence, quoted in an article by A. C. Hsiang that the U.S. goal in the dispute between Taiwan and PRC is to "make sure that military adventures are unattractive [to both sides]" (Hsiang, 2009). The recognition of the American role as a mediator in such conflict is important because, if it comes down to negotiations as to the limits of PRC's presence in the sphere of influence of the U.S., PRC could bargain for limits on

the U.S. presence in PRC's sphere of influence in Asia—and ultimately force the U.S. to retreat protecting Taiwan against PRC aggression (no matter the prevalent treaties—this is about two world powers competing against each other for influence around the world). In other words, if PRC's presence in Latin America becomes so extensive militarily in the future 20 years that it can protect some countries like Cuba and Venezuela from aggression from the U.S., then PRC can try to put more pressure on the U.S. to limit its presence in Asia and stop protecting Republic of China (ROC) in exchange for the same in return in Latin America.

Yet, Latin America is no longer solely dependent on the U.S. for most of its foreign investments' receipts. Globalization has allowed the free movements of capital around the world and Latin America has not been exempted from this phenomenon. The PRC Government, for one, has shown a willingness to invest in Latin America. In 2008, for instance, the PRC Government joined the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Latin America's premier development bank located in Washington, DC, with a \$350 million investment in the bank (Kraul, 2008). This important investment commitment by the Chinese Government with the Bank and the region shows that PRC's involvement in Latin America will not be short-lived, but long-lasting. But does PRC's involvement in the region really pose a threat to the U.S. hegemonic status in Latin America?

To What Extent is China a Threat to U.S. Hegemony in the Region?

There is not a clear answer to this question. Yet, whether one looks at the short or the long term implications of PRC's presence in Latin America, something becomes clear: PRC has more money at its disposal than any other country in the world and could well use it to invest and start to influence politics in the region. The latest PRC report noted that PRC has \$3 Trillion in foreign reserves at its disposal, making it the world's largest holder of foreign reserves (assets held in foreign denominated currency). (McDonald, 2011). Yet, PRC has shown a further commitment to investing and developing meaningful relationships with the countries in the region—at least with those with the largest economies—as evidenced by the fact that PRC investments in Latin America represented fifty percent of all Chinese investments outside the mainland in 2006 (Erickson, & Chen, 2007).

Whether or not PRC's involvement in the region constitutes a threat to the U.S. hegemonic status in Latin America, PRC's reach into the region offers Latin Americans a fresh opportunity to diversify its diplomatic and economic relations. As A.C. Hsiang noted quoting Richard N. Haass, the President of the influential Council on Foreign Relations: “[Latin American countries] have not only grown stronger but have expanded relations with others ... [and this has resulted in a region that is] shaping its future far more than it shaped its past.” (Hsiang, 2009 p.35) (Internal quotations omitted) Further, Hsiang (2009) suggests that two reasons may explain PRC's increasing involvement in Latin America: 1) The post-Iraq War “relative” U.S. political and economic decline after its post-Cold War moment of pre-eminent world power status; and 2) The willingness of Latin American countries to assert their “diplomatic independence” away from Washington by engaging in diplomatic and economic relations with countries with objectives inconsistent with American interests (p. 36). Latin

American countries now have, like never before, an opportunity to shape their future by diversifying their economic and diplomatic ties beyond the Western Hemisphere.

In the economic front, PRC's investments in Latin America have focused on the purchase of commodities. For instance, Brazil exports more goods to PRC than to any other country (except the U.S.), and these exports are mainly commodities, such as iron ore, steel, soy oil, and soybeans (Santiso, 2007). In addition, Venezuela and PRC entered into an agreement to build infrastructure projects in Venezuela and oil refineries in PRC, in order to process Venezuela's oil (Santiso, 2007). All in all, PRC imports from the region amounted to \$60 billion in 2006, which is more than the GDP of many of the countries in the region; PRC's investments in the region are expected to increase to \$100 billion by 2014 (Erikson, & Chen, 2007, pp. 75-76). Furthermore, by 2012 Venezuela is scheduled to provide PRC with 1 billion barrels of oil a day—becoming a very important supplier of PRC energy sources (Hsiang, 2009).

Yet, in the long run, the economic relations China may foster in the region may threaten to displace the U.S. from its position as the pre-eminent economic power in the region. As of this writing, PRC has entered into free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica, and Peru (Qingfen, 2011). The fact of the matter is that PRC recognizes the potential of the region. As Wan Jifel, the Chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, quoted by Qingfen points out: "Many Latin American nations are emerging economies, which expand quickly. This leaves various investment opportunities to PRC companies" (Qinfen, 2011).

PRC has several advantages over the U.S. in dealing with Latin America. Unlike the U.S., whom many countries in the region see with suspicion due to, some would argue, its excessive influence and its support for repressive regimes during the last century, PRC has no such reputation in Latin America. To the contrary, as Professor Antonio Hsiang points out, PRC's goal in the region is cooperation, not economic or political dominance over it. As Hsiang (2009) states: "PRC's policy goals in the region include: promoting mutual respect and mutual trust and expanding common ground; deepening cooperation and achieving win-win results; drawing on each other's strengths to boost common progress and intensify exchanges" (p. 39).

Furthermore, PRC is in a better position to cooperate with Latin America than the U.S. by virtue of its status as a developing country. Like Latin American countries, PRC—a developing country itself—opposes imperialism and the hegemonic domination of Latin America by the U.S. (Hsiang, 2009). Therefore, one of the main goals of PRC's involvement in Latin America is to "counterbalan[ce] American hegemony by enhancing multilateral relations" (Hsiang, 2009, p. 41). By negotiating with PRC, in turn, Latin American countries are doing the same: They are diversifying their foreign relationships as to reduce their dependency on the U.S.—and thereby reducing U.S. influence over the region. However, most importantly, Latin American countries see PRC's rise as a model of what they can become if they implement the necessary reforms. As Javier Santiso (2007), the Director of the ESADE Centre on global Economy and Geopolitics in Spain, notes: "After all, for the first time in its history Latin America can benefit not from one but three major world growth engines" (p. 14). The difference is that, unlike America and Europe, China is the only economic superpower that Latin Americans have seen rise in times of globalization and relative peace.

Yet, PRC's incursion into Latin America has been very carefully crafted as to avoid an open conflict with the U.S. in the latter's so called "backyard." PRC has taken a neutral position on many issues involving the region and the U.S. (Hsiang, 2009). This is because PRC wants to "avoid any public confrontation with the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere" (Hsiang, 2009, p. 38). Gonzalo S. Paz, a Professor of International Relations at George Washington University, in his essay *Rising China's Offensive in Latin America and the U.S. Latin America and the U.S. Reaction*, points out that while "China is not trying to challenge American hegemony in Latin America, [it] is the first Asian country to push enough to concern American analysts" (Paz, 2006). However, because PRC's interest in Latin America has focused on economics—securing food, energy source, and commodities—and the U.S. has perceived PRC's deals in the region as legitimate under the international framework of the World Trade Organization, PRC involvement in the region "has not sparked strong U.S. reactions yet" (Paz, 2006, p. 105).

At least for the short term, the U.S. does not represent PRC's real political contender in the region—PRC's real political fight in Latin America is with ROC. It's no secret that PRC pursues a "One-China Policy" with every country it establishes diplomatic or commercial relations. The "One-China Policy" holds that in order to establish diplomatic or commercial relations with PRC, the country in question has to recognize the People Republic of China (PRC) rather than recognizing or maintaining relations with ROC (Jenkins & Peters, 2009). Latin America constitutes, perhaps, the most important region of influence for ROC since out of the twenty or so countries that still maintain official diplomatic relations with ROC, at least fifty-percent of them are Latin American countries (Erickson, & Chen, 2007). PRC has been relatively successful in its fight against ROC in the Latin American front. For instance, over the past three decades, several Latin American countries, such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, and others have abandoned their recognition of ROC; Paraguay is the only South American country still officially recognizing ROC (Erickson, & Chen, 2007). However, ROC still maintains commercial relations with several Latin American countries who now recognize PRC.

But the fight between PRC and ROC over influence in Latin America is really, indirectly, a fight with the U.S. During the Cold War, many considered Taiwan not only a strong U.S. ally, but a U.S. satellite in the region (Erickson, & Chen, 2009, p. 70). Even though the U.S. no longer recognizes ROC, it still protects the country militarily and has diplomatic relations with the country. Hsiang (2009) notes that even though the U.S. only has commercial relationships with ROC, both countries engage in "transit diplomacy" since Taiwanese officials en route to Latin America often stop in the U.S. to hold meetings with important U.S. policymakers. If PRC ousts ROC from Latin America, it will reduce the support for ROC sovereignty in the world and weaken America's quest for protection of ROC since the U.S. could potentially be seen as the sole protector of the island. Such an outcome could create more pressure for the U.S. at home and from PRC to abandon its relations with ROC altogether as the protection of ROC already costs the U.S. hundreds of millions and PRC try to increase its leverage over the U.S. through the former's massive holdings of U.S. Treasury bonds and other dollar-denominated assets.

China's economic ascent and its involvement in Latin America can have long-lasting effects in the region—and these effects could be very positive. PRC, with its excess reserves and willingness to invest in Latin America, could emerge as an alternative for the development strategy the region wants to pursue. In his widely praised book, *Globalization and its*

Discontents, Nobel Laureate and former World Bank Chief Economist Joseph Stiglitz describes how Western-dominated global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) and the World Bank, have not taken into account the needs and opinions of their clients—mostly developing countries—in their formulation and implementation of policies set forth as conditions for the provision of aid or loans for countries in need. As Stiglitz (2002) notes: “Ideology [free market fundamentalism] guided policy prescription and countries were expected to follow the IMF guidelines without debate” (p. XIV), or not accept the money. Their choice.

Unlike the IMF, which provides loans to countries in crisis based on countries’ compliance with specific conditions, PRC does not impose such restrictive covenants and as such could emerge as the banker of choice for Latin American countries. In fact, PRC has offered economic aid to other developing countries with “no strings attached” as to the enactment and implementation of specific policies; the only requirement, it seems, is accepting PRC investments (Walker, & Cook, 2010). This suggests that PRC could well create an investment fund to provide aid and investments to Latin America with no strings attached, which could lead many Latin American countries to seek PRC’s help instead of the IMF’s in times of crisis. Seeking PRC’s help could be potentially better for Latin America since it would not have to enact specific policies to receive the aid and would have greater say as to the use of the funds received.

But the U.S. would probably oppose an overt Chinese effort to become Latin America’s bank of choice. The U.S. exercises substantial influence within the IMF. In fact, the U.S. is the single country with veto power within the organization (Stiglitz, 2002), and having PRC as the IMF’s competitor in Latin America would certainly run against U.S. interests in the region given the region’s traditional status as one of the major clients of the IMF. The U.S., joined by the IMF, has already opposed Chinese and Japanese efforts to create an Asian Monetary Fund (Stiglitz, 2002). As Stiglitz (2002) points out: “While the IMF was a strong advocate of competition in markets, it did not want competition in its own domain, and the Asian Monetary Fund would provide that” (p. 112). A Chinese attempt to create a Chinese Development Bank for Latin American would also run against the efforts of the U.S. backed Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), of which PRC is now a member. Therefore, because the U.S. would oppose such an initiative and it would be a duplicate of the Inter-American Development Bank, it would not be wise for PRC to pursue the establishment of such a bank for the region. This indicates that PRC will continue to provide aid and investments to Latin American countries in an informal way for the near future rather than risk losing involvement with the World Bank and IMF.

In the short term, at least, PRC does not represent a major threat to U.S. economic hegemony in the region. The U.S. continues to hold significant influence over the main international institutions upon which Latin Americans rely, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the IADB—and a PRC development bank for the region is not a likely option for the short term. Most important, the U.S. still has more investments in the region than PRC does, continues to be the region’s main trading partner and recipient of the region’s legal and illegal immigrants, and is in a better geographical position to engage and improve its relationship with Latin American countries.

How Can the US thrive in its Relations with Latin American Countries in the Face of Imminent Presence of other Superpowers in the Region?

Due to its non-confrontational approach in engaging the countries of the region, Latin American countries perceive PRC as a “champion of a multipolar world” (Paz, 2006, p. 101). Unlike the U.S., PRC has neither intervened in any Latin American country economically or militarily, nor supported overtly or secretly any attempts to overthrow a Latin American democratically elected government. In fact, PRC has deployed its military only once to support the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti (Paz, 2006). The U.S., in contrast, due to its military interventions and secret or, in some instances, overt support for the overthrow of some Latin American democratically elected governments, such as Chile’s Salvador Allende, has been perceived as the imperial force in the region. But according to Venezuela’s President, Hugo Chavez, things have changed. Mr. Chavez, one of the most ardent opponents of U.S. hegemony in the region noted that “[after] 100 years of domination by the United States... [n]ow we are free, and place this oil at the disposal of the great Chinese fatherland” (Dumbaugh, & Sullivan, 2005, p.4).

In the face of competition in its main geographical sphere of economic and diplomatic influence and its damaged reputation in such region, the U.S. needs to repair its image in the region and change its historic approach in dealing with the individual Latin American countries. America needs to engage Latin American countries, not as countries in need of its help, but rather as partners at the same level. Of course, Latin America as a whole is still a region in development and in need of U.S. investments. However, like never before, Latin America has another option. PRC provides a sustainable option based on PRC’s interest in the region and amount in foreign reserves, and the current economic situation of the U.S. and its growing interest in other parts of the world through its War on Terrorism.

In trying to engage Latin American countries as a partner and in a multipolar world, the U.S. could choose from a variety of policy choices. Here are a few options.

- The U.S. should, not only continue to establish free trade agreements and other sort of economic agreements with Latin American countries, but it should also review the agreements that have been already implemented as to make them fairer for developing countries in the region. For instance, most Latin American countries focus on agricultural products and cannot compete with U.S. farmers who have better equipment and receive subsidies from the U.S. government. In addition, Latin American countries still depend heavily on the U.S. market for most of their exports and imports, and cannot bargain for better contract terms under such conditions. Therefore, these agreements represent cases of unequal bargaining, which accompanied by the U.S. reputation in the region, result in more skepticism from Latin American countries towards America and its goals—and PRC is already taking note and advantage of the situation.
- The U.S. should expand its Fulbright Scholarship Program and offer more opportunities to Latin American students to study in the U.S. Studying in the U.S. is a privilege which few Latin Americans, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have. In order to increase its influence in Latin America in the face of competition from other emerging superpowers, the U.S. should increase its funding of educational programs with Latin

American countries since the U.S. needs to win the most important war—the war of ideas—and U.S. educated Latin Americans will be the best emissaries of U.S. intentions in the region.

- The U.S. government and the U.S. Chambers of Commerce of each Latin American country could design a joint strategy to engage American and business leaders of the region to create better opportunities for people in Latin America. If the people in the lower ranks of Latin American societies see a coordinated effort from the U.S. and its multinational corporations to not only increase their profits in the region, but also to create meaningful and sustainable job opportunities for them, they will be the first to elect leaders who are pro-progress and pro-American, which may mean the same. If the population sees American multinational companies only seeking profits and not caring about the population they serve, they will lean towards electing people who promise to fight against U.S. interests in the particular country.
- Finally, the U.S. can thrive in Latin America again by increasing its foreign aid in Latin America. After 9/11 the U.S. became inattentive of Latin America and focused on providing more aid to countries in the Middle East because of the War on Terror (Hsiang, 2009). The U.S. must offer once again, not only military support for Latin America, but also more economic assistance in order to regain its lost ground in the region and defeat the demagogues who would do anything to blame the U.S. for the problems they have created or have not been able to solve for their countries.

A Last Word: Recoup

Recoup. The Obama Administration has been very careful and skillful in reaching out to Latin America. It has reached out to the different countries, even those who have governments in place who oppose U.S. involvement in the region. Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's President, for instance, hugged President Obama and gave him a book titled "Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of Pillage of a Continent"—something that probably would not have occurred during the Bush Administration. In addition, the Obama Administration has lifted some restrictions for traveling to Cuba—another big step in trying to improve its image in Latin America.

However, the Obama Administration has yet to take specific steps to help Latin America develop. PRC offers Latin America an alternative to development because PRC has risen to economic superpower status in the last thirty (30) years, something that Latin Americans have seen with their own eyes. This is the shift. In order for the U.S. to regain its lost influence in the region and thrive in Latin America with PRC as a close competitor, it needs to approach the region *de novo*. It can no longer approach the region as it did in the past because the same methods that failed in the past will fail again. PRC does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. hegemony in the region, but it indicates a shift in the world and in Latin America: We now live in a world post-U.S. unilateralism. We now live in a multipolar world—a world dominated not by one country or superpower, but by many. And the U.S. should take note of that in dealing with Latin America. *Recoup.*

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