

LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES HITS PERU

By Joe McGowan

Surely everyone has heard of the law of unintended consequences.

That law hit hard in Peru as a result of actions taken by the military dictatorship, which seized power on Oct. 3, 1968.

Not long after deposing President Fernando Belaunde, the military dictator, Gen. Juan Velasco, set about instituting socialist programs. He nationalized the banks, an American oil company and declared agrarian reform.

Under the agrarian reform, the military took control of all large ranches and farms in the country. Then they gave every campesino who had worked on the land title to one hectare (2.47 acres).

Unfortunately, the generals didn't give the campesinos any money with which to buy seed or fertilizers. The campesinos had no tractors or plows, so they tried to work the land with shovels.

In one year, Peru went from a country that exported crops, grain and beef to a country that had to import all those items.

There were food shortages, meatless days and soaring foreign exchange debt. Strikes were called by various groups nearly every day. So, after 12 years of dictatorial rule, the generals — without a hint of shame -- proclaimed they had accomplished their goals and they stepped aside for democratic elections.

It was a little late. By now, the communist guerrillas in the mountains were causing major problems. Foreign investors were not willing to risk capital in Peru, so the nation teetered along for more years.

I returned to Peru in the summer of 1998, almost 28 years to the day when the military arrested me and kicked me out of the country for writing stories they did not like.

During my week's stay, I became acquainted with a taxi driver recommended by the hotel where I was staying. There are many unlicensed taxis and I was told some of the drivers would hold up passengers and dump them in the outskirts of the city.

My taxi driver, a large but gentle man named Alberto Quevedo, told me he had been a boy on a huge ranch/farm when the military seized the property and gave his father one hectare of land to work.

Alberto said his life had been idyllic up until that point. "The ranch had horses and we were allowed to ride them whenever we wanted," he said. "We were able to swim in the creek after school. We had plenty of food and the owners made sure we had clothing and medical care."

Things changed quickly. Alberto told me his father had no money and couldn't buy a tractor, a plow or seed and fertilizer. So, the family moved to the big city—Lima. Lima's population nearly doubled after the revolution as all the campesionos and their families

moved to the city in hope of finding work.

Crime and drug problems soared and the military was unable to create the needed jobs. Dirt-poor barrios sprung up all around the city. People lived in tar paper shacks and there might be one water tap to serve hundreds of people. Sanitation was primitive.

Alberto said he has been working as a taxi driver since he became old enough to drive. He said he put in at least 18 hours a day, sometimes grabbing a nap in front of the hotel while waiting for a customer.

“My biggest problem,” he told me, “is caring for my sons. I have three boys, and I worry constantly about them getting into gangs and dealing drugs. This city is no place for them.”

I realized the unintended consequences of those generals’ actions were plaguing this wonderful country a generation later.

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