With world leaders back in New York this week for the UN General Assembly, most of the attention was focused on Russia's power grab in Ukraine and the so-called Islamic State's march through Syria and Iraq. Yet as nearly three dozen heads of state in Latin America and the Caribbean know all too well, the power vacuum left by Team Obama's withdrawal of U.S. leadership has sprouted chaos in their region too. After spending much of August in Mexico, I was saddened to see the damage wrought by the drug wars. Once a relatively safe country, Mexico has been overrun by half-a-dozen powerful cartels which have battled each other and government forces leading to over 100,000 deaths within the past decade. While the body count continues to climb there and in Central America, fueling the ever-worsening immigration crisis, it's natural to look to Washington for answers. Though the 2008 Merida Initiative authorized over $2 billion on training and equipping Mexican forces while reforming their judicial system, it isn't close to turning the tide. As we learned from Plan Colombia, a $7 billion counter-narcotic operations and training program began in 1998, it takes *significant* resources to crush cartels and return to the relative security which Colombians enjoy today. Sadly, the days of such strong U.S. commitment overseas are a distant memory. In fact, the opposite is happening — the White House is in full retreat. And it's creating a "Gangsta's Paradise" in Latin America and the Caribbean, as Coolio's 1995 best-selling rap song might have titled it. In July 2009, just six months after President Obama began to implement his sweeping vision of a "transformed America," the last U.S. Air Force AWACS reconnaissance aircraft was booted out of the Forward Operating Location at Manta, Ecuador. Though American Air Force and Navy planes flying from Ecuador's remote coastline led to 60 percent of the drug seizures in the entire Eastern Pacific, Mr. Obama's fellow former Illinois academic, President Rafael Correa was implementing *his* vision of a transformed *Latin America* – one without U.S. influence. Correa doubled down this year, kicking out both the U.S. Military Group and U.S. AID from the Quito Embassy. The anti-American push from leftist dictators in the 9-member ALBA alliance, led by Venezuela and Cuba, followed closely by Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua, has been accompanied by a simultaneous pullout from the White House. In Congressional testimony this year, the Commander of Miami-based U.S. Southern Command, Marine General John F. Kelly said four major U.S.-Latin America exercises and 225 engagement activities were cancelled in 2013. His forces were unable to take action against 74 percent of the suspected narco-trafficking shipments due to lack of ships and aircraft, and 20 more metric tons of cocaine reached the U.S. than in 2012. Drug kingpins now dominate the landscape, from La Paz to Quito to Managua to Juarez, fueling an epidemic of extortion, kidnappings and murders. Outside of Syria and Iraq, it's the most dangerous place on earth. And then there's Hezbollah, Iran's global terror proxy. They've expanded operations in Latin America with narco-trafficking, and according to an American Enterprise Institute report authored by Roger Noriega and José Cardenas, evidence suggests Hezbollah is sharing their

“terrorist experiences and techniques with Mexican drug cartels along the U.S. border.” Yet the retreat is even more widespread. When I was a Navy spokesman based in Puerto Rico 15 years ago, our signature Latin America exercise was *Unitas*, an annual six-month circumnavigation deployment around South America with 5-6 ships ever since 1959. And what’s *Unitas* like these days? Last year it was just one ship, deployed for just two weeks off the coast of Colombia. Like in Russia and Syria/Iraq, outside the faculty lounge and golf course where Mr. Obama seems to draw all his inspiration, it’s the law of the jungle out there. Might makes right. The White House retreat from global affairs is just as welcomed by Latin America’s ruthless cartels and growing list of dictators. One Nobel Prize later, so much for “hope and change.”