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The Cold War in Central America, 1975–1991

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The strategic stalemate that prevented a direct military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union displaced violent superpower competition to areas of the Third World where the two blocs could invest in local and regional wars without risking direct confrontation. The Soviet Union tended to approach such conflicts cautiously even when they involved other Communist states.[1] The United States, by contrast, adapted its security policies to a containment doctrine that defined the political complexion of every non-Communist government in the world as a matter of potential strategic interest. Local opposition to foreign rule in the US and European colonial empires, and social movements aiming to displace traditional elites elsewhere, confronted a strong US preference for reliably anti-Communist (and thus conservative to right-wing) regimes. Even moderate to conservative regimes that sought to advance national interests by constraining US influence came under assault from Washington. Governments that collaborated closely with the United States often had to ignore or suppress local interests opposed to US policies.

In its prosecution of the Cold War in the Third World, the United States enjoyed formidable advantages over its Soviet rival. Economic strength gave US leaders a decided financial and material advantage over the Soviets. Military bases projected US power into regions bordering on Communist states throughout the world. US ideological and cultural assets also helped. Alliances with local elites eager to reduce domestic challenges proved especially helpful. The United States deployed all of these resources in response to perceived affronts to its regime and policy preferences wherever they occurred. The Soviet Union and its allies worked assiduously to overcome

1 The Soviets calibrated their support for allies and "proxies" in the Third World to avoid costly and unproductive commitments. In Latin America, for example, the Soviets declined to support guerrilla movements in the 1960s and criticized the Cubans for doing so. See Jorge Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 3.

US advantages by supporting anti-US political movements and regimes, though their successes were fewer and frequently reversible. The US–Soviet rivalry produced an era of escalating violence throughout the Third World that did not stop until the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990–91.[2]

In Latin America, unlike most other regions, the Cold War projection of US power was based on its existing strategic and economic predominance. By World War I, the United States had succeeded either in controlling or in securing the overthrow of governments deemed unfriendly throughout Central America and the Caribbean. In the 1920s, US economic and geopolitical interests extended to most of South America as well. In the 1930s, faced with growing resentment against its interventions in the Caribbean, which made it difficult to secure Latin American cooperation in efforts to revive trade after the collapse of 1929–33, the United States announced a "Good Neighbor" policy, according to which it would henceforth refrain from direct military interventions anywhere in the hemisphere.[3]

The Cold War provided a convenient rationale for enlarging and institutionalizing preexisting US efforts to impose its ideological and policy preferences on other states. As the United States insisted on greater conformity, however, opposition to its influence often intensified. An early crisis point occurred in 1959–62 when a newly installed Cuban government opted to defect to the Soviet camp rather than adjust its policies to US requirements.[4] The Cuban government then supported movements opposed to pro-US elites and regimes throughout the hemisphere. The United States reacted forcefully between 1962 and 1973 by intervening to secure the removal of governments it deemed unsuitable or unreliable. When the left-wing nationalist Sandinista movement (the Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) friendly to Cuba seized power in Nicaragua in 1979 and armed opposition movements gained support in El Salvador and Guatemala, the United States again reacted harshly.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had no significant strategic or economic interests in the western hemisphere. Soviet leaders refused pleas for military aid to avert the US attack on Guatemala in 1953–54.[5] Though it

2 See Human Security Center, *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Part I.

3 On the Good Neighbor Policy, the classic work is Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York: Norton, 1967).

4 See James G. Hershberg's chapter in volume II.

5 On Soviet bloc rejection of Guatemalan aid requests, see Piero Gleijesis, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), ch. 9.

provided military and economic aid to Cuba from 1961, the USSR opposed Cuba's support of guerrilla insurgencies in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the Soviets pushed the Cubans to abandon support for such movements in Latin America, offered only modest assistance to the elected socialist government of Chile (1970–73), and sought normal diplomatic and trade relations with the some of region's most repressive military regimes.[6] The Soviet Union and some East European Communist states provided aid to Nicaragua after the victory of the Sandinista insurgency, but in small amounts reflecting Soviet economic decline and political uncertainty.

Latin American governments, political movements, and interest groups often challenged US predominance from within the region. Though circumstances and capacities varied, nearly every Latin American government attempted at one time or another to mitigate or evade compliance with US interests by turning to other great powers, such as Britain, France, and both imperial and Nazi Germany. The Cuban appeal to the Soviet Union in the 1960s thus followed a long tradition. At various times, Latin American governments, unsuccessfully for the most part, requested regional or international support through the Pan American Union or its successor, the Organization of American States (OAS), or the United Nations. Some sought to deflect or resist US pressure by mobilizing popular support, but such mobilizations raised popular expectations, alienated elites, and often drove the United States to intervene.

Had the United States limited its Cold War objectives to defense against threats to its security, it would have had little reason to exert itself in Latin America. In addition to its unchallenged economic and political predominance, the United States emerged from World War II with nuclear weapons and a military establishment immensely superior to any regional power, indeed more than sufficient to deter any potential threat from Latin America without compromising other strategic missions. US political leaders, however, tended to accord great symbolic importance to deviations from US policy preferences in Latin America, especially in the Caribbean basin. They worried about the demonstration or "domino" effect of any defections from the US camp on neighboring and even distant countries, but their greatest concern focused

6 On Soviet policy in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, see Dominguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, chs. 3–4; Cole Blasier, *The Giant's Rival: The USSR and Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983); and Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

on the domestic political consequences should additional territory "fall" to "Communism."

The institutional foundations for prosecuting the Cold War in Latin America developed in the late 1940s with the signing of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (or Rio Treaty) in 1947 and the creation of the OAS in 1948. In addition to pushing for new inter-American institutions, the US government also abruptly shifted its diplomatic and intelligence agencies from combating Axis influence in Latin America to fighting Communism. In the Caribbean and Central America, where the United States could overturn and replace governments with ease, US officials expected a particularly high degree of conformity to US policy preferences.

The Cuban revolution of 1959 marked a watershed in the Cold War strategy of the United States in Latin America. After defeating an invasion force of US-sponsored counterrevolutionaries at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, the Castro government received Soviet military aid to bolster its defenses against what both Cuban and Soviet authorities perceived as the threat of an imminent invasion by the armed forces of the United States. The Soviets secretly placed intermediate-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba in September–October 1962 and succeeded in extracting from the administration of John F. Kennedy (1961–63) a pledge not to invade Cuba in exchange for their withdrawal.[7] The survival of the Cuban revolution and the country's transformation into a Communist state allied politically and diplomatically to the Soviet Union induced major shifts in US policy toward Latin America during the Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–69) administrations.[8] On the one hand, the Kennedy administration created an "Alliance for Progress," an aid program with the goal of demonstrating that non-Communist, democratic regimes could match the social progress achieved by Communist Cuba. On the other, it developed a new strategic doctrine to guide military aid that emphasized the role of Latin America's armed forces in suppressing internal threats to the established order rather than defending the hemisphere against external invasion. These threats included not only Cuban-backed guerrilla movements, which erupted in the mid-1960s, but also elected governments that drifted leftward or otherwise failed to conform to US requirements.

7 See James G. Hershberg's chapter in volume II.

8 Despite Cuba's repeated expressions of interest, the USSR never entered into a formal military alliance with Cuba nor did it ever formally agree to defend Cuba militarily. Cuba was not a member of the Warsaw Pact.

The Carter administration and human rights in Central America

When Jimmy Carter assumed the US presidency in January 1977, only Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Colombia in Latin America had governments voted into office in open, competitive elections. The new US administration, spurred by public, congressional, and international criticisms of the policies of Richard M. Nixon (1969–74) and Gerald R. Ford (1974–77) in Latin America, made human rights the centerpiece of its Latin American policy. To the consternation of the region's military regimes, the US government suddenly became critical of the measures they saw as necessary to eliminate Communist and left-wing influence. President Carter endorsed the conventional view, often at odds with official US actions in the 1960s and 1970s, that the lack of democracy threatened the stability of the region in the long run. He saw dictatorships as inherently unstable and worried that the opposition movements they provoked would follow the path of the Cuban revolution toward radicalization and eventual alliance with the USSR. Some Carter officials thus began pressuring the generals to cede power to elected governments and cease abusing citizens during the transition. However, others in the Carter administration worried that abruptly withdrawing support from military regimes would create the very instability that Carter claimed he wanted to avoid.[9]

The Carter administration began in 1977 to implement its human rights policies in Central America, though it gave initial priority to renegotiating the Panama Canal Treaty. Only Costa Rica, of the five Central American republics, held regular elections, respected the civic and human rights of its citizens, and provided public goods and services (education, health, infrastructure) with reasonable efficiency and transparency. In Honduras, the Carter administration succeeded in improving human rights by supporting democratically inclined military officers who eventually engineered the country's return to civilian rule with elections to a constituent assembly in 1980. It failed in Guatemala and El Salvador, however, where human rights abuses were escalating and neither government showed the slightest interest in negotiating with the United States. Carter cut off military aid to both these countries in 1977. In response, these governments ended military ties to the United States

9 For a useful and insightful review of Jimmy Carter's human rights policies and their implementation in Latin America as a whole, see Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: US Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell university Press, 2004), ch. 6.

and denounced the Carter policy as intrusive meddling in their internal affairs. The US government continued economic aid to avoid punishing innocent beneficiaries, and sought quietly to develop contacts and leverage within the two military establishments. This backdoor military diplomacy succeeded briefly in El Salvador in 1979, but failed in Guatemala.

Carter focused most of his attention on Nicaragua, in part because the regime of Anastasio Somoza seemed most likely to bend to US pressure. In 1978, Somoza's rivals began to pose a threat to the government, making it potentially more dependent on US help. When the country exploded in mass protests and insurrection in September, Carter was already pressuring President Somoza to cede power to a new government that would organize elections. If managed adroitly, Somoza's government could then be replaced by one dominated by one or another of the country's traditionally moderate political parties, grateful to the United States for having paved its way to power. The alternative, which Carter and his advisers sought to avoid, was a polarization of Nicaragua into warring camps, with the initiative passing to the armed guerrillas of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. Somoza, on the other hand, was determined to retain power and convinced that, if the United States were forced to choose between him and the FSLN "Communists," it would have to choose him and back off from its efforts to push him out.[10]

Events moved more rapidly than either Carter or Somoza anticipated. Somoza maneuvered to elude demands for "free elections" and began eliminating plausible alternatives. On January 10, 1978, the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the wealthy publisher of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* and a possible successor, touched off a general strike. FSLN guerrillas gained adherents throughout the country. Urban attacks and even large-scale uprisings against the National Guard multiplied. The FSLN managed to seize the national Congress building in Managua in August. The following month, the FSLN briefly seized the northern town of Estelí, buoyed by a mass insurrection against the regime. In December, Somoza rejected a last effort by the Carter team to negotiate a peaceful departure.

Between January and June 1979, the Carter administration watched as the FSLN and Somoza's National Guard fought one another. US military and economic aid to the Somoza government was formally cut off in February,

10 Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* , 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002), chs. 4–6; Thomas Walker, *Nicaragua, the Land of Sandino* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1981); William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States and Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1998), 10–32.

12. Jubilant Sandinista rebels in the main square of Managua, June, 1979. The Sandinistas seized Managua with huge popular support.

and Carter officials hoped Somoza would step down. In late June, after the OAS rejected a US plan to send "peacekeepers" to Nicaragua because their main effect would have been to save the National Guard from defeat, US officials opened negotiations with the FSLN, insisting that the Sandinista leaders agree to appoint "moderates" to a majority of Cabinet posts in the new government and promise to hold free elections. The FSLN agreed after some hard bargaining. Somoza then fled Nicaragua on July 17; two days later, the Sandinistas entered Managua amid tumultuous celebrations.[11]

As the Carter administration worked to salvage the wreckage of its anti-Sandinista policies in Nicaragua, it moved simultaneously to avert "another Nicaragua" in neighboring El Salvador. It did so by inspiring key officers in the Salvadoran armed forces to overthrow the highly repressive government of General Humberto Romero on October 15, 1979. The new government created a five-person *junta* or council to exercise presidential powers until reforms could be implemented and elections called. Two members of the *junta* represented the armed forces; three were civilians. The government

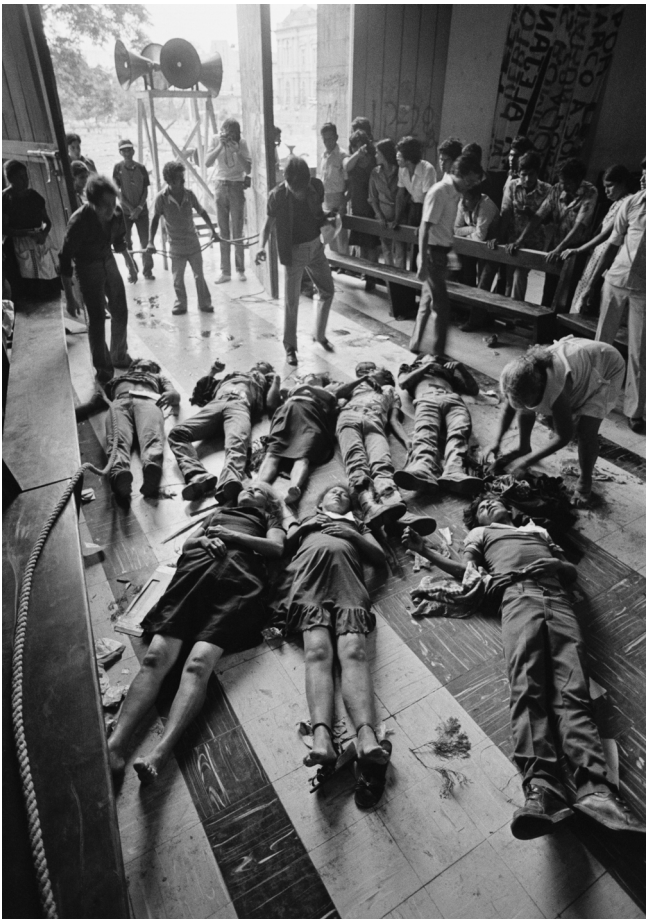
11 Pastor, *Not Condemned*, chs. 4–6; Lawrence Pezzullo and Ralph Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

announced an end to repression, full restoration of civic and human rights, and a commitment to agrarian reform and other progressive social policies. For the next three months, El Salvador exploded into renewed political activity and social activism. Political parties, labor unions, community and civic organizations, church groups, and publications of all kinds suddenly emerged from hiding or developed spontaneously. Tragically, the *junta* never managed to exert control over the Salvadoran military and its repressive apparatus and was not supported by the United States when it sought to do so. The Salvadoran military and police units remained intact and crushed their foes. On January 3 and 4, 1980, the three civilian members of the Salvadoran *junta* and all the civilian members of the Cabinet resigned in protest. In the months that followed, the Salvadoran civil war began in earnest. The Carter administration wanted democracy in El Salvador, but it gave priority to preserving the integrity of the Salvadoran military and its command structure to avoid repeating a collapse similar to that of Somoza's National Guard.[12]

The election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980 hastened the collapse of Carter's efforts. In El Salvador, Reagan's campaign speeches criticizing Carter's human rights policies had helped persuade the Salvadoran military to launch an orgy of repression. In December 1980, after the rape and murder of four US nuns, Carter briefly suspended military aid, but this decision had no impact on the Salvadoran military because its leaders correctly expected Reagan to reverse it.

In Nicaragua, Reagan's campaign rhetoric, which portrayed the Sandinistas in Nicaragua as "Communists" and included pledges to remove them from power, convinced the movement's leaders that there was little point in placating the United States any longer. US-backed politicians in the Sandinista Cabinet lost what leverage they had earlier acquired. More significantly, FSLN leaders decided to extend military and financial aid to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) fighting against the Salvadoran military. The FMLN had the support of nearly all the opposition parties and organizations in El Salvador, except for a minority faction of the Christian Democrats, whose leaders had agreed to form a new government with US support. The Sandinistas hoped that the FMLN would be able to take power in a "final offensive" scheduled for January 1981, just prior to Reagan's inauguration. They hoped that two revolutionary governments in

12 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 33–51; Pastor, *Not Condemned*, ch. 11; James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America* (New York: Verso, 1988), ch. 8.



13. Funeral of Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador, who was killed by right-wingers in March 1980 as he was saying mass. A bombing at the funeral left thirty-eight people dead, and the civil war intensified.

Central America would be able to withstand the hostility of the new US administration better than one. When the FMLN's final offensive failed, the Sandinistas stopped the flow of weapons and support, but this did not impress Reagan and his aides.[13]

13 See LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*; Americas Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union, *Report on Human Rights in El Salvador, January 1982* (Washington, DC: American Civil Liberties Union, 1982); Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982).

The Reagan revolution versus the Sandinista revolution

In its first weeks in office, the new administration made clear that it intended to reverse a "dangerous decline" in US power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and its allies. The Reagan team charged that timid policies had caused the "loss" of Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Grenada, Iran, Mozambique, and Nicaragua to hostile regimes. They wanted to support allies and punish foes. Central America's proximity and weakness made it an ideal test case for their bold plans. Democracy and human rights would continue to be important goals in the rhetoric of US officials, but quickly became secondary concerns in practice. The new administration set about repairing relations with abusive but pro-US regimes throughout the hemisphere, including the Argentine military *junta* whose members were later prosecuted, and the military government of Guatemala, then in the process of razing hundreds of indigenous villages and exterminating their inhabitants.[14]

The administration's chief policy goals in Central America included the destruction of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and victory over insurgents in El Salvador and Guatemala. It expected Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama to help achieve these objectives and exerted unremitting pressure on their governments whenever their enthusiasm for US efforts flagged.

President Reagan made Nicaragua a key symbol of his administration's aggressively anti-Communist foreign policy. Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, the president stated, had become a "Communist," "totalitarian" state similar to Cuba. Between January 1981 and December 1983, the administration orchestrated a step-by-step escalation of tensions with Nicaragua, seeking to build public support for an eventual US military intervention. The 1984 US presidential campaign forced the administration to reverse course to avoid political setbacks, but after the president's reelection in November, Reagan and his advisers expected to resume and consummate its campaign to rid the hemisphere of the Sandinista regime.

The Reagan administration's hostility toward the Nicaraguan government stemmed from inaccurate premises. The Sandinistas were not turning Nicaragua into a "totalitarian dungeon," as Reagan described it. They did not impose a one-party state, nationalize the country's productive property, or suspend

14 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala, Memory of Silence (Tz'inil na'tab'al): Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification*, 2nd ed. (Guatemala: Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1998).

civic and human rights. They did adopt a new constitution that called for open and competitive elections in 1985, which they moved to 1984 in response to US demands. Nor did the Sandinista regime pose the slightest military or strategic threat to the United States. The Sandinistas announced that their country would remain in the OAS and continue to fulfill its obligations under the Rio Treaty. They stated repeatedly that they would never permit foreign (i.e., Cuban or Soviet) military bases on their territory and offered to sign a treaty, with stringent inspection provisions, to that effect, though they did accept substantial economic and military aid from both.

Throughout the 1980s, both Cuba and the Soviet Union pressured the Sandinistas to seek an accommodation with the United States and made it clear that they were not in a position to offer either military protection or sufficient economic aid to subsidize the Nicaraguan economy in the event that the Sandinistas wished to impose a socialist model. Soviet military aid totaled a mere $12 million from 1979 through 1980, rising to $45 million in 1981 after the United States began funding exile groups, eventually called the Contras, that were seeking to create a military force to carry out attacks against the Sandinista armed forces from bases in neighboring Honduras. Military aid from all the Soviet bloc countries peaked at approximately $250 million in 1984. Economic aid from the Soviet bloc rose to a high of $253 million in 1982 and declined thereafter.[15] The Sandinista government received more aid from Western Europe and other Latin American countries than from the Communist bloc, virtually all of it conditional on respect for private property and civil liberties.[16]

To President Reagan, however, the Sandinistas were implacable enemies of the United States and had to be overthrown. In March 1981, after less than two months in office, he authorized the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to support the Contras. By December, the president had authorized the CIA to provide them with funds, training, equipment, and logistical support. The

15 On Soviet aid, see "Latin Focus: Despite Fears of US, Soviet Aid to Nicaragua Appears to Be Limited – White House Will Push To Aid Contras to Lessen Risk of Region Revolution – Managua Shuns Puppet Role," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 1985, 1; Stephen Kinzer, "For Nicaragua, Soviet Frugality Starts to Pinch," *New York Times*, August 20, 1987; W. Raymond Duncan, "Soviet Interests in Latin America: New Opportunities and Old Constraints, "*Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, 26,2 (May 1984), 163–98.

16 On the Sandinista regime, see Thomas Walker, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), and Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1991). On Soviet policies and attitudes, see Kiva Maidanik, "On *Real* Soviet Policy Toward Central America," in Wayne S. Smith (ed.), *The Russians Aren't Coming: New Soviet Policy in Latin America* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 89–96.

Honduran government essentially ceded control of its border with Nicaragua to the CIA and its Nicaraguan recruits (initially drawn from the ranks of the former Somocista National Guard). The Argentine military regime managed to spare enough officers from its domestic campaign of terror to provide appropriate training for the new Contra forces in 1981 and 1982. The Honduran military also provided logistical support and training. The initial Contra force of 500 grew to an army of 15,000 at its maximum strength in the late 1980s.[17]

The first major Contra attack on Nicaraguan territory occurred on March 14, 1982. For Reagan, the beginning of the Contra war brought two benefits. First, it demonstrated the president's resolve. This helped to reduce squabbling within the administration, weakened those who preferred diplomacy, and gave notice to other countries in the region (including those supporting the Sandinistas, such as Mexico and Venezuela) that efforts to negotiate a solution to the US–Nicaraguan conflict were likely to be futile. Second, the Contra attacks had a predictably galvanizing effect on the Sandinistas themselves. In response, the regime declared a state of siege, imposed restrictions on the press and on civil liberties, and instituted universal military conscription. These measures gave the Reagan administration the evidence needed to back its claims about the Sandinistas' totalitarian proclivities. Reagan did not want to tame the Sandinistas; he wanted them ousted from power.

Though he succeeded, temporarily as it turned out, in creating the monster he wanted to slay, Reagan faced a skeptical public and Congress. Initially, his administration had funded the Contras with money already appropriated for the CIA and the Defense Department. When these funds ran out, it had asked Congress for additional money. Wary legislators had approved $19 million for Contra aid in 1983–84, but had prohibited the administration from using any funds for overthrowing the government of Nicaragua, activities that might be defined as state-sponsored terrorism under international law. In late 1983, as polls had showed that public disapproval of the administration's Central American policies could affect the president's reelection effort, administration officials had begun speaking in encouraging terms about prospects for a peaceful resolution of differences with the Sandinistas.[18]

During the 1984 presidential campaign, Reagan's Nicaragua policy collapsed into incoherence. Some of the president's advisers used the pause in rhetorical

17 Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, ch. 13.

18 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, ch. 14.

hostilities to push for a negotiated settlement. In June, Secretary of State George Shultz, who had kept himself aloof (or had been excluded) from dealing with Central American issues, spent two and a half hours at the Managua airport talking with Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. Some military leaders in the Pentagon worried that an invasion of Nicaragua might lead to a protracted intervention, with the population supporting Sandinista guerrillas, much as had happened in Vietnam between 1965 and 1975. But the hawks in the CIA and the White House sought to evade the growing restrictions on aid to the Contras. They tried to secure funds from private donors and from several countries closely allied to the United States, such as Israel and Taiwan. They also approved the mining of Nicaraguan harbors (a flagrant violation of US law and treaty obligations as well as international law) and supported other acts of terrorism against civilian targets in Nicaragua, just as press reports began linking the Contras to human rights abuses, corruption, and drug-smuggling. Angered, Congress then voted to cut off all aid to the Contras.[19] But some White House aides again secretly ignored the new restrictions and intensified their campaign to raise funds for the Contras, an effort led by National Security Council staff officer Colonel Oliver North.[20]

The most serious threat to the hawks in the administration came from the Sandinistas themselves, who adopted a democratic Constitution, moved national elections to coincide with the US elections in November 1984, lifted restrictions on the press and on civil liberties, and agreed to permit all opposition parties, even those supporting the Contras, to run candidates and campaign freely. The Sandinistas also agreed to sign a "Central American Peace Treaty," drafted to meet US requirements and brokered by Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela (the Contadora Group). The treaty provided for internal democracy, a pledge not to support the Salvadoran guerrillas, the withdrawal of all Soviet bloc and Cuban advisers, a promise never to permit foreign military bases on Nicaraguan territory, limits on the size of its military establishment, and an independent and intrusive inspection system to ensure compliance. Thereafter, the Sandinistas kept their pledge not to aid the FMLN in El Salvador and expelled some of its leaders from Nicaragua. The Sandinistas also asked most of their Cuban and Soviet bloc military advisers to leave. Although these were exactly the steps urged upon the Nicaraguan leaders by Secretary of State Shultz,

19 On the congressional debates and restrictions, see Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976–1993* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993).

20 The illegal White House activities erupted into public view in 1986 in what came to be known as the Irangate or Iran–Contra scandal (see n. 23).

the hawks in the Reagan administration – North, CIA deputy director Robert Gates, and others – maneuvered to get Honduras to reject the treaty and to persuade the Costa Rican and Salvadoran governments to express reservations.[21]

After the reelection of President Reagan, the campaign to overturn the Sandinista regime resumed immediately.[22] Momentarily cowed by the magnitude of the Reagan electoral triumph, Congress appropriated $27 million in "non-lethal" aid for the Contras in 1985–86 and then appropriated $100 million ($30 million for weapons) for 1986–87. Despite their new weapons, however, the Contras did not become an effective military force. More at home in their well-stocked Honduran base camps than in combat, they suffered a series of defeats in engagements with the Sandinista army in 1984–85 and subsequently reverted to terrorist attacks on civilian targets, such as sugar mills, farm cooperatives, rural schools, and health clinics, most of which were defended, if at all, by lightly armed civilian militias.

The Reagan administration's illegal activities in supplying arms to the Contras came to light in a series of incidents that culminated in October and November 1986. In October, the Nicaraguans shot down a CIA resupply plane and captured a surviving crewmember, who confessed fully; the Sandinistas eventually released him. In November, news began leaking from the Middle East of a secret deal with Iran, in which, among other things, the administration agreed to sell arms to Iran and use the "profits" to acquire black-market arms for the Contras.[23]

In addition to breaking domestic laws, the Reagan administration found itself accused of violating international law by the Nicaraguan government before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Since the violations, which included the CIA mining of Nicaraguan harbors, could not be denied, the US government asserted that for reasons of national security it would no longer accept the jurisdiction of the International Court in matters relating to Central America. When the court rejected this argument and rendered a verdict requiring the United States to pay reparations to Nicaragua for the damages it had inflicted, the United States ignored the court's ruling.[24]

21 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, chs. 15–16; for a contrary view, see Susan Kaufman Purcell, "Demystifying Contadora," *Foreign Affairs* (Fall 1985), 74–95.

22 See, for example, Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945–1993* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 200–01.

23 On the Irangate or Iran–Contra scandal, see Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *The Iran–Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York: New Press, 1993).

24 Smith, *The Last Years*, 197–99.

When Republicans lost control of the US Senate in the November 1986 elections and the Iran–Contra scandal erupted two weeks later, public support for the administration's Nicaragua policy disappeared. The administration held on to its goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas throughout the fall of 1986 and the spring of 1987 because it still had the funds to do so. When it became clear in the summer of 1987 that Congress would not allow the Contra war to continue into the next fiscal year, the administration's Nicaragua policy disintegrated. In August, the president proposed a plan to House speaker James Wright that specified the conditions under which the US government would be willing to end its confrontation with the Sandinista regime. Wright agreed with much fanfare, but then adroitly announced that Reagan's conditions coincided with terms already negotiated among the Central American countries in talks initiated and led by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias. Called the "Esquipulas II" agreement, named for the Guatemalan town where the treaty was negotiated (an Esquipulas I agreement had not prospered), the treaty accomplished what the Reagan team had sought to avoid: it provided a mechanism for ending the Contra war without the disappearance of the Sandinista government. Reagan objected and bitterly opposed the Esquipulas II agreement, but the disarray in his administration due to the Iran/Contra scandal, together with congressional and public opposition to his Central American policies, left him little room to maneuver.[25]

In fact, the Esquipulas II agreement embodied virtually all US demands except for the overthrow of the Sandinista government. It required the Sandinistas to place Nicaragua's internal politics under international supervision, to hold new elections (already scheduled) but without restrictions on foreign financing of electoral campaigns, and to negotiate separately with the Contras. The Sandinistas agreed to these terms, despite their risks, because the Contra war had devastated the Nicaraguan economy, forced the government to abandon most of the social programs it had begun to implement, and cost the lives of 30,000 Nicaraguans, mostly civilian supporters of the Sandinista revolution. Though the Reagan administration had failed to overthrow the Sandinistas and found itself forced to accept a peace process it had bitterly opposed, the Contra War and the election of Reagan's vice president,

25 On negotiating with the crippled Reagan team, see Jim Wright, *Worth It All: My War for Peace* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1993). On the peace agreement, for which Oscar Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987, see Martha Honey, *Hostile Acts: US Policy in Costa Rica in the 1980s* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), ch. 14; LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, ch. 21; John M. Barry, *The Ambition and the Power* (New York: Viking, 1989).

George H. W. Bush, to the presidency in 1988 persuaded most Nicaraguans that their country had no choice but to install leaders that Washington would approve. The Sandinistas lost the election of 1990 to a US-organized and -financed coalition of anti-Sandinista parties.[26]

Counterinsurgency in Guatemala and El Salvador

In Guatemala and El Salvador, the Reagan administration supported the counterinsurgency campaigns of the local militaries. The Guatemalan guerrilla movement had revived in the mid-1970s, attracting widespread support in the indigenous communities of the highland provinces. Afflicted by economic change, increasing inequality, and generational conflicts, and nurtured by the growing presence of outsiders (Catholic Action, evangelical missionaries, and Peace Corps volunteers), many indigenous communities sought new ways to resolve tensions. National governments, which had once kept the peace by maintaining clientelistic relations with indigenous leaders, were not so good at managing these relationships when they were controlled by military leaders. Pervasive neglect punctuated by episodes of repression replaced the old system.[27] The guerrillas recruited the young, the energetic, and people seeking democracy or social justice, but also developed ties to traditional community leaders who had lost faith in the government. By 1981, 17,000 soldiers of the Guatemalan army faced 6,000 insurgents organized into seven fronts nominally covering two-thirds of the nation's territory; the guerrillas occupied one provincial capital and dozens of highland villages.[28]

The Reagan administration sought to renew military aid to Guatemala, but failed to persuade Democrats to go along. Massive human rights abuses, which the administration denied, troubled even some Republicans in Congress. Although the Guatemalan army circumvented the cutoff by purchasing weapons from other countries, the Reagan administration still fretted about the regional implications of guerrilla successes in Guatemala and looked for an opportunity to help reverse them. When dissident military commanders overthrew Guatemalan president Lucas García and installed former general

26 John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 166.

27 See Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 220–33.

28 Gabriel Aguilera Peralta, "The Hidden War: Guatemala's Counterinsurgency Campaign," in Nora Hamilton, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, and Manuel Pastor, Jr., *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and US Policy in the 1980s* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 153–82.

Efraín Ríos Montt, a recent convert to evangelical Protestantism, Reagan renewed economic aid. In December 1982, he visited Guatemala City, praised the new government's commitment to defending Guatemala from the threat of Communism, and promised to renew US military aid.

The Ríos Montt government acted decisively. In 1982 and 1983, it destroyed an estimated 686 indigenous villages and hamlets, killing between 50,000 and 75,000 people. It forced 800,000 peasants into "civil patrols," sparing their communities only if they provided evidence of their success in uncovering and killing insurgents. In a population of fewer than 9 million, the regime created a million refugees (150,000 of whom fled into Mexico).[29]

Ríos Montt was toppled by a new coup in August 1983. The new government, headed by General Oscar Mejía Victores, consolidated the gains achieved against the insurgents. He ended Ríos Montt's quixotic but popular campaign against corruption, rescinded tax increases to which the nation's economic elite had objected strenuously, and promised to return the country to civilian rule. The Reagan team welcomed the government's pledge to hold new elections because it provided evidence of the regime's commitment to democracy at a time when credible reports of atrocities were flooding Congress and the media. On the other hand, the new regime refused to be drawn into US efforts to contain Communism in the rest of Central America. Mejía Victores declared that "the countries of the isthmus could coexist with a Communist Nicaragua."[30] His civilian successors encouraged negotiations and compromise.

Crushing the insurgency in El Salvador proved to be the Reagan administration's most difficult challenge in Central America. The Salvadoran guerrillas had widespread support and proved to be remarkably resilient in the face of relentless attacks. The brutality of the Salvadoran military and its associated "death squads" matched that of the Guatemalans but, unlike their Guatemalan counterpart, the Salvadoran military faced almost certain defeat and disintegration without massive US aid. But the military's human rights abuses outraged some members of the US Congress whose votes were needed to get military aid approved.

29 On the Guatemalan counterinsurgency efforts and their human cost, see Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala, Memory of Silence*. For a moving first-hand account of the atrocities, based on the experience of the late Fr. Ronald W. Hennessey, a Maryknoll priest from Iowa, see Thomas R. Melville, *Through a Glass Darkly: The US Holocaust in Central America* (n.p.: Xlibris, 2005), part VI. On Reagan administration policy, see Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 158–69.

30 Floria Castro, "La política exterior de Guatemala, 1982–1986," *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, 43 (January–April 1987), 65.

The Reagan administration thus faced two important but contradictory tasks. The first was to prevent the collapse of the Salvadoran military. This required an effort to promote competence, reduce corruption, and minimize high-visibility human rights abuses. The second task was to cobble together a civilian government credible enough to ensure that Congress would provide military aid despite continuing evidence of the military's abuses.

Reagan's advisers found a solution in José Napoleón Duarte, leader of the conservative wing of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). Duarte had credibility with Democrats in Congress because of his past relationships with Carter and because the Salvadoran military despised him. Reagan insisted that the Salvadoran military accept Duarte's election. Though the PDC soon collapsed and disappeared from Salvadoran politics, it did use its temporary power to open political space just as the Salvadoran military's dependence on US aid was forcing it to become more discriminating in its brutality. Duarte even succeeded in removing a number of abusive senior commanders with US help, though the death toll and human rights abuses remained at high levels throughout his administration.[31] Between October 1979 and early 1984, nearly 40,000 people, most of whom were unarmed noncombatants, were murdered by the armed forces, and over 500,000 refugees fled the country.[32]

The Reagan administration devoted more time, effort, and resources to Central America than any other administration in the history of the United States. It failed, however, to achieve its main objectives. It did not overturn the government of Nicaragua or thwart a peace agreement that defined conditions for peaceful coexistence. The Guatemalan insurgents were driven from the indigenous highlands at a vast cost in life and property, but this victory damaged US credibility on human rights, yet failed to attract Guatemalan support for US policies elsewhere in Central America. The administration did transform the Salvadoran army into a large, well-equipped, and more effective fighting force, but did not defeat the FMLN. Though some political space opened under the PDC regime, the Reagan team blocked the civilian government's efforts to negotiate an end to the civil war.

31 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, chs. 6–12; Arnson, *Crossroads*, 139–54; Terry Karl, "Exporting Democracy: The Unanticipated Effects of US Electoral Policy in El Salvador" in Hamilton, Frieden, Fuller, and Pastor (eds.), *Crisis in Central America*, 173–92. Total US aid to El Salvador in the 1980s amounted to $4.7 billion, roughly $1,044 per inhabitant.

32 Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 169–74; Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: US Policy and El Salvador* (New York: New York Times Books, 1984); United Nations, *From Madness to Hope: The Twelve-Year War in El Salvador*, Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador (UN Doc s/25500, April 1, 1993).

The end of the Cold War in Central America

The end of the global Cold War during the presidency of George H. W. Bush pushed the new administration to alter course in Central America. Instead of seeking to overthrow the Sandinistas and win the war in El Salvador, the administration adopted new policies designed mainly to remove Central America from the US political agenda and drastically reduce the time and resources devoted to the region.

First, however, Bush and his advisers decided to get rid of the Panamanian government dominated by the once-cooperative General Manuel Antonio Noriega. Noriega was tolerated despite evidence of his links to drug-smuggling and money-laundering so long as he supported US policies in Nicaragua and El Salvador. When he balked at providing direct aid to the Contras, news accounts exposed his alleged criminal connections. Noriega was indicted for drug-smuggling and other crimes by federal grand juries in Florida in February 1988. The United States invaded Panama in December 1989, kidnapped Noriega, and brought him to the United States to be tried on drug charges.[33] Nearly all of the Latin American nations opposed the US action, and the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the OAS, condemned the invasion.[34]

With Noriega out of the way, the Bush administration swiftly turned its attention away from Central America. As the Cold War ended, the region lost both its strategic significance, arguable at best, as well as its symbolic role as a battleground in a larger global conflict. Elites in Central America, along with the region's military establishments and right-wing political forces, came to realize that they could no longer count on massive US aid. The collapse of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe pushed opposition parties and guerrilla movements to reassess their options, even though the help they received had been modest at best. In short, the sudden disappearance of the Soviet Union produced a stalemate in which the only plausible outcome for all of the local contenders was a negotiated peace in the context of US hegemony.

In Nicaragua, with money running out, the Contras reached a belated ceasefire agreement with the Sandinista government. Although the Contras did not surrender their arms, the Sandinistas complied scrupulously with the treaty and scheduled elections for February 25, 1990. The US government

33 See Eytan Gilboa, "The Panama Invasion Revisited: Lessons for the Use of Force in the Post Cold War Era," *Political Science Quarterly*, 110, 4 (Winter, 1995), 539–62.

34 See Robert Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool: US Foreign Policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 95–98.

persuaded the fractious anti-Sandinista opposition to unite around a single candidate, Violeta Chamorro, and poured money into her campaign. The invasion of Panama and the refusal of the Contras to disarm and accept an amnesty helped to convince Nicaraguan voters that peace could not be achieved and the economy restored without appeasing the United States. Chamorro won a narrow victory.[35]

In El Salvador, the United States also changed course and backed UN-brokered talks between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN. The defeat of the corrupt and discredited PDC at the hands of the right-wing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) party, which had close ties to the military and its death squads, reassured the military high command that its interests would be protected. Late support and some arm-twisting by the Bush administration produced a document signed at the United Nations in New York on December 31, 1991.[36]

Negotiations to end the civil war in Guatemala were more protracted. Civilian presidents did not challenge the armed forces, but elections did open political space for dissent and opposition. With help from the William J. Clinton administration (1993–2001), a peace settlement was signed in December 1996, but not before an internal investigation by the President's Intelligence Oversight Board concluded that the CIA had been deeply involved in human rights abuses in that country.[37]

Between the onset of the global Cold War in 1948 and its conclusion in 1990, the US government secured the overthrow of at least twenty-four governments in Latin America, four by direct use of US military forces, three by means of CIA-managed revolts or assassination, and seventeen by encouraging local military and political forces to intervene without direct US participation, usually through military *coups d'état*. These actions enhanced the capacity of US leaders to shape events throughout the region by making intervention a credible threat, even in countries where it had not yet occurred. As a consequence, for over forty years, Latin Americans were ruled by governments more conservative (and thus reliably anti-Communist) than Latin American voters were inclined to elect or than US citizens themselves would have been inclined to tolerate.

35 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 553–64; Coatsworth, *Central America*, ch. 7.
36 LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 564–78.
37 Cited in Richard Nuccio, "The CIA and the Guatemalan Peace Process," foreword to the 1999 edition of Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, exp. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xxiv–xxvi.

The human cost of this effort was immense. Between 1960, by which time the Soviets had dismantled Stalin's gulags, and the Soviet collapse in 1990, the numbers of political prisoners, torture victims, and executions of nonviolent political dissenters in Latin America vastly exceeded those in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites. In other words, from 1960 to 1990, the Soviet bloc as a whole was less repressive, measured in terms of human victims, than many individual Latin American countries.[38]

The hot Cold War in Central America produced an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. Between 1975 and 1991, the death toll alone stood at nearly 300,000 in a population of less than 30 million. More than 1 million refugees fled from the region – most to the United States. The economic costs have never been calculated, but were huge. In the 1980s, these costs did not affect US policy because the burden on the United States was negligible. Indeed, there were benefits. Calling attention to threats emanating from a region so close to the United States helped the Reagan administration gain credibility and build support for its other priorities, including major increases in defense spending. Decades of confrontation with the Soviet Union had created a domestic political culture that rewarded aggressive behavior when the costs could be passed on to others.

Since many of the concerns the Reagan administration expressed about Central America were empirically false or historically implausible, many historians and political scientists have tended to conclude that US policy in Central America during the Cold War cannot be explained as the result of rational calculation. Policymakers, they claim, suffered from a kind of anti-Communist cultural malaise or imperial hubris.[39] Jorge Dominguez has argued, for example, that the Cuban revolution so traumatized US policymakers that, at crucial moments in the succeeding decades, US policy became "illogical."[40] But for Central Americans, it made little difference whether the Cold War policies of the United States arose from rationally calculated malevolence or merely undisciplined atavism. Many question whether this sad history came to a definitive end when the Cold War ended.

38 This observation is based on the author's examination of published CIA and State Department reports and on the reports of Freedom House, a private nonprofit organization hostile to Communist regimes.

39 See, for example, Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1982); Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 361, 366.

40 Jorge Dominguez, "US–Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath," in Victor Bulmer-Thomas and James Dunkerley (eds.), *The United States and Latin America: The New Agenda* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 33.