



# **POLICY ROUNDTABLE: REAGAN AND LATIN AMERICA**

*December 18, 2018*

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## 1. Introduction: Latin America and the Legacy of Ronald Reagan's 1980s

*By Evan D. McCormick*

It has become one of the most iconic photographs of the 1980s: A gleeful President Ronald Reagan, flanked by First Lady Nancy and first dog Rex, holds up a bright red shirt emblazoned with simple block letters that read, “Stop communism [in] Central America.” According to press reports, Reagan had been handed the shirt spontaneously from a crowd gathered to see the couple off to Camp David in March 1986: Frank Santana, a Cuban-American visiting the White House along with a group of top-performing stockbrokers, had taken the shirt off of his own back and handed it to the president, who took the gift aboard Air Force One.<sup>1</sup>

The image endures not only because it captures Republican fervor for defeating the prospect of socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere at the time, but also because of the tragic irony that history adds to the photo. Owing to laborious peace processes and the investigative work of truth commissions, we now know that while Reagan was “performing” anti-communism to approving crowds on the White House lawn, the human cost of the political violence that was occurring throughout the hemisphere was mounting to horrific numbers. As many as 75,000 Salvadorans were killed in the civil war that ran from 1979 to 1992, during which U.S. military aid and support for El Salvador’s counterinsurgency became a centerpiece of Reagan’s policy in the region.<sup>2</sup> In Nicaragua, 30,000 people died in the civil war between the Sandinista government and irregular forces, the Contras, which the Reagan administration supported despite U.S. laws forbidding it.<sup>3</sup> The 1980s also witnessed the most violent period of Guatemala’s civil war, which claimed 200,000 lives between 1960 and 1996, many of them at the hand of U.S.-backed military governments.<sup>4</sup>

These figures indelibly mark the period ushered in by Reagan’s election as the bloodiest of the Cold War in Latin America. But casualties alone understate the extent to which Reagan and his advisors recast Latin America as an ideological and cultural battleground in the struggle against Soviet-backed communism. “The Americas are under attack,” declared the Committee of Santa Fe — a group of conservative foreign policy thinkers, several of who went on to serve in the Reagan administration — in 1980. “Latin America, the traditional alliance partner of the United States, is being penetrated

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<sup>1</sup> “President Gets Anti-Communist T-Shirt,” *Associated Press*, March 7, 1986, <https://www.apnews.com/1a579eee883f47d039ed31a52e594163>.

<sup>2</sup> *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the U.N. Truth Commission on El Salvador*, United States Institute of Peace, April 1, 1993, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 387.

<sup>4</sup> Rocio Cara Labrador and Danielle Renwick, “Central America’s Violent Northern Triangle,” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, June 26, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle>. [



by Soviet power. The Caribbean rim and basin are spotted with Soviet surrogates and ringed with socialist states.” To protect the nation’s security and restore its legitimacy, Reagan Republicans believed, the United States would have to extinguish the prospect of revolutionary change in its own backyard.

It is not surprising that a crescendo of militarism accompanied Reagan’s election in 1980. Reagan campaigned in large measure against President Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy, and in no place did Reaganites believe Carter’s policies toward the Global South had so undermined U.S. interests and legitimacy as in the Western Hemisphere. With a number of Latin American countries facing violent social conflicts, Carter sought to reverse the traditional U.S. policy of interventionism, emphasizing respect for human rights instead. Reagan officials bemoaned Carter’s signing of the Panama Canal treaties, which they felt relinquished control of a traditional symbol of U.S. might in the region.<sup>5</sup> They saw fecklessness in Carter’s handling of the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, which brought the leftist Sandinista faction to power. They chastised Carter for curtailing aid to military governments in Guatemala, Argentina, and Chile over human rights concerns. And they feared that the insurgency led by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador would cause that country to be the next domino to fall.<sup>6</sup> “In four years,” Reagan alleged in an October 1980 campaign address, the Carter administration had “managed to alienate our friends in the hemisphere, to encourage the destabilization of governments, and to permit Cuban and Soviet influence to grow.”<sup>7</sup>

After taking office, Reagan officials moved swiftly to transform Latin America into a region where U.S. power would stand as an unquestioned bulwark against the Left. In his first year in office, Reagan dispatched military advisors to El Salvador and authorized massive amounts of military aid to the regime there despite widespread public and congressional criticism.<sup>8</sup> He cut off aid to the Sandinista government and immediately began exploring means for providing lethal aid to the Contras. The administration promised to downplay human rights abuses and sought to resume military aid to Guatemala, Argentina, and Chile. When faced with evidence that such support was energizing military and security forces to carry out human rights violations against innocent civilians,

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<sup>5</sup> See “Ronald Reagan Opposing 1978 Panama Canal Treaties: Debate with William F. Buckley,” *Firing Line*, Jan. 13, 1978, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4495975/ronald-reagan-opposing-1978-panama-canal-treaty>.

<sup>6</sup> For the most famous of these critiques, see Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary*, Volume 68, No. 5 (November 1979) and “U.S. Security & Latin America,” *Commentary*, vol. 71, no. 1 (January 1981)

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Reagan “A Strategy for Peace in the ‘80s,” Televised Address, Oct. 19, 1980, Ronald Reagan Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/10-19-80>.

<sup>8</sup> On Reagan’s initial actions in Central America see, for example, William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Brian D’Haeseleer, *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017). On congressional reactions and popular protest against Reagan’s policies, see, for example, Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); and Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

U.S. officials denied or downplayed the claims.<sup>9</sup> And when Congress passed laws making aid to the Contras illegal, the administration brazenly violated those laws, ensnaring itself in the Iran-Contra scandal.<sup>10</sup>

In its emphasis on Latin America as a focal point of U.S. national security, the Reagan administration's approach was hardly unique. Indeed, by pledging U.S. power and legitimacy to defeating communism in Latin America, Reagan tapped into a deep tradition of asserting U.S. hegemony in the region for the benefit of U.S. security and economic interests, not to mention political effect at home.<sup>11</sup> But combined with the culture of frenetic anti-communism at work in Reagan's foreign policymaking circles, these policies represented a decisive escalation of the Cold War in the region.

But to remember the 1980s only for the tragic ideological violence in the region is to miss how the decade's conflicts, and America's responses to them, spawned more enduring transformations of U.S. foreign policy and hemispheric politics. Beginning in 1982, Reagan's unapologetic anti-communism and his rhetorical commitment to defeating revolution by force were gradually superseded by rhetoric and policies that emphasized the spread of democracy and free markets in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>12</sup> Military aid was not abandoned, but it was increasingly combined with development assistance and so-called democracy-promotion programs.<sup>13</sup> This shift was accompanied by the rise of a cadre of neoconservative officials who stressed the salience of democratic transitions underway in places like El Salvador, Argentina, and Brazil. The promotion of anti-communist, democratic forces also had deep roots in Cold War policy, but the energy with which the Reagan administration threw itself behind those efforts was amplified by new institutions like the National Endowment for Democracy, which made support for civil society a new pillar of U.S. regional policy.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the 1980s, Secretary of State George Shultz was lambasting "odd men out" — dictatorships of both the Right and Left — for their failure to conform to the wave of democratic transitions.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, for many Reagan policymakers, America's support for countries

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 4-6; Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: a History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Evan D. McCormick, "Freedom Tide? Ideology, Politics, and the Origins of Democracy Promotion in U.S. Central America Policy, 1980-1984," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 60-109, [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00516](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00516).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> See Evan D. McCormick, "Breaking with Statism? U.S. Democracy Promotion in Latin America, 1984-1988," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (November 2018): 745-71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx088>; and essays in Robert Pee and William Michael Schmidli, eds., *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Joanne Omang, "Shultz Puts Chile on List of Latin Dictatorships," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1986.

making the transition from military rule — like in Chile, where the United States supported the plebiscite that ousted Gen. Augusto Pinochet — was the administration’s crowning achievement.<sup>16</sup> Critics of neoconservative foreign policies, too, have identified Reagan’s turn to democracy-promotion in the context of Latin American counterinsurgency efforts as a direct antecedent of U.S. interventionism in the Global War on Terror.<sup>17</sup>

## A Climactic Decade

While there is broad agreement that Reagan’s escalation of the Cold War in Latin America was a crucial episode in the history of U.S. foreign policy in the region, there is much less agreement on what aspects of that period are most historically significant today. For while recent administrations, Democrat and Republican alike, have portrayed Latin America as a region in which the United States works with partners to jointly confront shared policy issues within a post-ideological framework — issues like democratic governance, fraud, corruption, gangs, narcotics, and trade — recent developments have cast that consensus into doubt. Steady migration to the United States from the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, driven by organized criminal violence and economic stagnation, has shined a spotlight on how those issues are directly related to U.S. interventions in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> For its part, the Trump administration has signaled that it welcomes the return of ideological conflict in the region. When Trump’s national security advisor, John Bolton, referred to regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as a “Troika of Tyranny,” and praised the newly elected right-wing president in Brazil, who pines for military dictatorship there, it felt like 1981 all over again.<sup>19</sup>

What sense, then, can be made of the 1980s, and the enduring impact of Reagan’s policies toward Latin America during the climactic decade of the Cold War? The *Texas National Security Review* has brought together a group of scholars and policy practitioners whose diverse perspectives on those years highlight the different enduring lessons and realities that have emerged from that era.

The first two essays examine the administration’s policies toward Central America, where its perception of social unrest as a national security threat defined its regional approach. In the first essay, James M. Scott, Herman Brown chair and professor of political science at Texas Christian University, revisits the Reagan Doctrine, a policy that authorized U.S. support for anti-communist insurgencies across the globe, and for the Nicaraguan Contras in particular. Although the Reagan Doctrine was not labelled as such until late in Reagan’s presidency, Scott sees the policy’s roots in a common worldview held by Reagan and his key advisers — like Ambassador to the United Nations

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<sup>16</sup> Elliott Abrams and Bill Kristol, “Chapter 3: Ronald Reagan and Human Rights,” *Conversations with Bill Kristol*, Oct. 10, 2016,. <https://conversationswithbillkristol.org/video/elliott-abrams/?start=1392&end=1890>.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Miles Culpepper, “The Debt We Owe Central America,” *Jacobin*, Nov. 1, 2018. <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/central-america-migrant-caravan-trump>.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Sabatini, “Trump Tries Old Tricks with Latin America,” *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/opinion/trump-tries-old-tricks-with-latin-america.html>.



Jeane Kirkpatrick and Director of Central Intelligence William Casey — that saw conflict in the region as a symptom of Soviet expansionism. Thus, Scott writes, the

Reagan Doctrine in Latin America was a policy about the Soviet Union in the region, not a policy *for* the region itself. Its proponents sought to raise the costs to the Soviet Union of maintaining or acquiring clients, discourage them from attempting new acquisitions, and perhaps force them to moderate their foreign policy behavior.

These efforts caused controversy and incoherence within the administration, Scott explains, when confronted by pragmatists like Shultz, who sought a regional settlement to the conflict. Scott identifies three features of the struggle over Nicaragua that are common historical themes of U.S.-Latin America policy and which persist today: the imposition of a U.S. ideological lens on the region, U.S. claims to hegemony and an exaggerated sense of America’s abilities to control the region, and the “tendency to ignore human security concerns of the population in Latin America.”

In Nicaragua, the Reagan Doctrine was designed to reverse a socialist revolution that had already taken place. As Andrea Oñate-Madrado, assistant professor of history at California State Polytechnic University, discusses in her essay on Reagan’s intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War, the administration sought to “draw the line” against the prospect of another such revolution breaking out in El Salvador. Oñate-Madrado, whose scholarship examines the diplomatic records of the Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, argues that the Reagan administration refused to recognize the national roots of the conflict. Because of its determination to apply U.S. military resources to defeat the guerillas on the battlefield, Oñate-Madrado argues, the Reagan administration bears responsibility for the scale of the war, its duration, and its continuing effects on Salvadoran and regional politics today.

Were developments in the region driven by U.S. policy machinations, or forces outside of U.S. control? Two essays informed by policymaking experience in the Reagan administration explore the dilemmas surrounding such a crucial question. Daniel W. Fisk, currently the chief operations officer of the International Republican Institute and a former official in the State Department Bureau for Inter-American Affairs and in the White House communications office during the Reagan administration, suggests that the most enduring legacy of the 1980s was the region’s broad reorientation toward electoral democracy. This change was not imposed by the United States, Fisk argues, but was the product of “actions and earlier sacrifices” of Latin Americans that the United States — beginning with the Reagan administration — encouraged and supported. Fisk acknowledges the military emphasis of the Reagan administration’s early policies, but argues that those policies were superseded by a strategic focus on political warfare, which called for U.S. support to anti-communist political parties and civil society actors that were empowered by democratic transitions throughout the region. While Fisk agrees that Reagan’s narrow emphasis on elections was initially a shallow basis for judging whether democracy was flourishing, he argues that “the Reagan administration deserves credit for supporting electoral processes that had to start somewhere in some format recognizable as expressing the popular will.” Characterizing the widespread acceptance of democratic political norms throughout Latin America today, along with a



continuing U.S. emphasis on elections in the region, Fisk sees the roots of today's U.S.-Latin American relationship in Reagan's 1980s.

This reorientation to promoting democracy was not without its opponents in the White House, suggests Ed Lynch, a professor of politics at Hollins College who worked with the Reagan White House Office of Public Liaison, focusing on Central America. There, Lynch witnessed firsthand the friction that came from abandoning the anti-communist focus that drove policy in the early years. Lynch argues that these were more than turf battles, and that "divisions over Central America reflected deep, incompatible differences of opinion about the basic direction of U.S. foreign policy." He characterizes first a "leveraged ally faction," which, adhering to the principles of academic realism, "believe[d] that powerful nations like the United States ought to be able to compel smaller nations to support U.S. interests. Put differently, alliances ought to be based on leverage, so that compliance is assured and U.S. interests are paramount." The second faction, what he calls the "natural ally faction," believed that "democratic and free market-oriented nations would usually desire the same things as the United States." Thus, adhering to the principles of academic idealism, this latter group saw "promoting democracy and capitalism [as] the best way to advance U.S. national interests." The administration's inability to reconcile these two factions led to incoherence in its policies in the region and, Lynch argues, lasting tensions in U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.

The perception that the Cold War was ending in Latin America, where political-military violence continued well beyond Reagan's departure from the White House, owed much to how Reagan re-framed U.S. counterinsurgency policies for political audiences in the United States. In an essay on Reagan and the drug war, Michelle Getchell, an assistant professor in strategy and policy at the Naval War College, highlights how Reagan's focus on so-called "narcoterrorism" established a link between "narcotics traffickers, political terrorists, and leftist guerrilla movements" in Latin America. The fact that this relationship was poorly defined was helpful to the Reagan administration, which capitalized on social fears about drugs and emphasized a supply-side approach in order to pursue "counterinsurgency in Latin American countries at a time when the support of the American public for Cold War military interventions was at an all-time low." The very fact that militarized counter-narcotics operations remain at the heart of U.S.-Latin American diplomacy today shows the extent to which the Cold War ideological conflict was reframed as challenges supposedly shared by governments that serve as stakeholders in a U.S.-led regional order.

### **The Return of Ideology?**

Each of the essays in this roundtable suggests that the Western Hemisphere today is largely the one that Reagan left behind. But in their various emphases on continuity and change, the essays also suggest that scholars have more work to do in untangling the complicated relationship between Reagan's escalation of the Cold War in Latin America and a post-Cold War environment in which ideological conflict is diminished but hardly absent. For while Bolton's "Troika of Tyranny" speech is a throwback to the naked intensity of Reagan's regional approach — conjuring up images of Reagan's "Stop Communism" t-shirt, — Bolton's invocation of tyranny also invokes another aspect



of the 1980s: the idea that, by the end of the decade, the United States had succeeded in forging a regional order based on the principles of liberal democracy and free trade. That the Trump administration is attempting to ostracize “odd men out” reinforces the extent to which the United States had succeeded in Reagan’s basic goal of eliminating the threat of revolution to the regional status quo.

Collectively, the essays in this roundtable suggest how important it is to see the Reagan years as pivotal for U.S.-Latin American relations, for regional politics, and for U.S. foreign policy as a whole. At the same time, it remains difficult to identify a single, coherent vision for the region that persisted throughout Reagan’s two terms, or to trace a clear transformation from the anti-communism of Reagan’s early years to the conservative internationalist posture that Republicans today emphasize. Instead, these essays suggest, the most important legacies of the Reagan years may lie in the tensions and contradictions of Reagan’s approach — an approach that married an acute sense of vulnerability in the region with the confidence that spreading U.S. values could serve U.S. security interests and bolster America’s legitimacy. The tensions and internal contradictions that emerged in the 1980s continue to guide U.S. policy in Latin America today, even as the United States wields uncontested hegemony in the region.

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## 2. Revisiting the Reagan Doctrine in Latin America

*By James M. Scott*

Nearly four decades ago, Ronald Reagan assumed the office of the presidency amid concerns about political developments in Latin America, including fears of leftist revolutions, anti-American regimes, and growing influence by the Soviet Union. Today, with the second year of the Trump administration quickly passing, the United States again faces concerns over developments that appear to threaten U.S. standing and interests in the region, declining American influence, and the accelerating involvement of out-of-region states, such as Russia and China, in the affairs of the region. Indeed, in the spring of 2018, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even publicly invoked the Monroe Doctrine, calling it relevant to the threat of “new imperial powers,” from which he suggested the countries of the region needed protection.<sup>20</sup> Later in 2018, press reports indicated that

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<sup>20</sup> Felicia Schwartz, “Tillerson Raps Russia, China as ‘Imperial Powers’ in Latin America,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 1, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tillerson-raps-russia-china-as-imperial-powers-in-latin-america-1517525936>.



President Donald Trump actively considered overthrowing the Maduro regime in Venezuela — characterized as a serious security threat in the region — through the use of military force. While the particular issues and dynamics have shifted significantly, and the concerns and approaches of the current administration often sharply contrast with those of the Reagan administration, such parallels raise questions about the nature of U.S.-Latin American relations and the progress (or lack thereof) that has occurred since the 1980s.

This analysis revisits one of the Reagan administration’s signature policies — the “Reagan Doctrine” — which committed the United States to aiding anti-Marxist insurgencies around the world, with Nicaragua the particular target in the Western Hemisphere. I first review key features of the origins, application, and controversies of the Reagan Doctrine and its implementation in Nicaragua and then offer a few comments on its legacy and contemporary implications for U.S.-Latin American relations. In particular, I call attention to three persistent issues that plagued U.S.-Latin American relations in the application of the Reagan Doctrine, and which appear to continue to do so in the current context: a) the tendency to impose our own ideological lens on the region, coupled with the failure to grapple directly with real governance issues in the region; b) the “our backyard” perspective stemming from the continued relevance of the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary, joined with the tendency to exaggerate U.S. capabilities to shape and control matters in the region; and c) the tendency to ignore the human security concerns of the population in Latin America.

## Remembering the Reagan Doctrine<sup>21</sup>

Reagan took office in 1981 determined to challenge Soviet expansionism in the developing world. One element of this effort involved a controversial initiative to aid anti-Marxist insurgencies, a policy that eventually became known as the Reagan Doctrine. A central component of this signature initiative focused on the development of and support for the Nicaraguan resistance — the Contras — to oppose the Sandinista regime, a leftist government that took power through the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution.

### *Origins and Development*

From the start, the Reagan Doctrine in general, and its application to Nicaragua in particular, reflected a distinct ideological perspective, widely shared by the president and members of the Reagan administration, that motivated the initiative and the interpretation of the events in Latin America that prompted it. As the conservative right rose to power in the late 1970s, culminating in Reagan’s election victory in 1980, its members emphasized apparent Soviet expansionism in the late 1970s, which they regarded as evidence of the failure of America’s containment policy and,

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<sup>21</sup> This analysis draws from James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: the Reagan Doctrine in American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), especially chapters 2 and 6.



especially, the “détente” strategies of the previous administrations. These factors, coupled with opportunities afforded by insurgencies targeting leftist and pro-Soviet regimes in the developing world, combined to create a policy window.<sup>22</sup>

In Latin America, as in other regions, this ideological lens led the administration to view the region largely as a playing field for the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. The president and most of his key advisors believed that conflicts in Latin America and other parts of the developing world originated in a “grand design” by the Soviet Union for expansion and world domination. For instance, the president stated, “I know of no leader of the Soviet Union...that has not more than once repeated, in the various Communist Congresses they hold, their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use.”<sup>23</sup> Nor was the president alone in this perspective. Reagan and his advisors shared this viewpoint, so the administration tended to downplay local sources and causes of issues and conflicts. As Reagan himself stated in a June 1980 interview, “Let’s not delude ourselves, the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren’t engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn’t be any hot spots in the world.”<sup>24</sup> Guided by this particular Cold War lens, the administration devised the Reagan Doctrine in an attempt to move beyond containment to embrace a version of the Eisenhower administration’s “rollback” to develop a policy initiative that would “weaken the links between radical Third World regimes and the Soviet Union, undermine the stability of these Third World governments, and where possible, support or even execute their overthrow.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the Reagan Doctrine in Latin America was a policy about the Soviet Union in the region, not a policy *for* the region itself. Its proponents sought to raise the costs to the Soviet Union of maintaining clients, discourage them from attempting new acquisitions, and perhaps force them to moderate their foreign policy behavior.

The Reagan Doctrine developed through accelerating efforts by the United States to support rebel groups in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and by the simultaneous attempts on the part of U.S. policymakers to construct a strategy to connect, coordinate, and justify these efforts. In Latin America, this initiative was heavily influenced by the contemporary interpretation and application of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary. Together, these policies emphasized the “our backyard” orientation to the region, asserting U.S. opposition to interference in the hemisphere by out-of-region powers and America’s right to intervene throughout the hemisphere. For the Reagan Doctrine in Latin America, these historical referents manifested themselves not only in opposition to what was perceived as Soviet intrusions, but to the more general challenge of Marxism in the region, which the administration regarded as a subversive import as well.

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<sup>22</sup> See Dario Moreno, *U.S. Policy in Central America: The Endless Debate* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990) and Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Interview with the President,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 17, no. 10 (1981): 232.

<sup>24</sup> Karen House, “Reagan’s World: Republican Policies Stress Arms Buildup, a Firm Line to Soviet,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 1980, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Michael McFaul, “Rethinking the Reagan Doctrine in Angola,” *International Security* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1989–1990): 102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538933>.



Even before Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election, the groundwork for the Reagan Doctrine was being laid, and concerns about Latin America, and especially the consequences of the Nicaraguan Revolution, were at the core. For example, in 1979 and 1980, the Committee of Santa Fe, a group of Latin American specialists led by Lewis Tambs, Roger Fontaine, Lt. Gen. Gordon Sumner, Jr., and David C. Jordan (the first three of whom received positions in the Reagan administration), warned of the expansion of Soviet-supported satellites and argued that Central America would be used as a platform from which to threaten the interests of the United States in the region, and ultimately to attack the territory of the United States itself.<sup>26</sup>

Once in office, Reagan's National Security Planning Group, which included Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, and National Security Adviser Richard Allen, led the way. In a meeting in March 1981, for example, Casey proposed the "first-draft" of the Reagan Doctrine, advocating for a CIA-directed program to provide covert aid to resistance movements in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Cuba, Grenada, Iran, Laos, Libya, and Nicaragua.<sup>27</sup> By early 1983, the group furthered the initiative in two National Security Decision Directives — NSDD-32 and NSDD-75. NSDD-32 included a plan to provide funds to anti-Communist movements as a forward strategy to put pressure on the periphery of the Soviet empire.<sup>28</sup> NSDD-75, which was drafted in 1982 and signed in early 1983, went further: "US policy will seek to... weaken and, where possible, undermine the existing links between [Soviet Third World allies] and the Soviet Union. US policy will include active efforts to encourage democratic movements and forces to bring about political change inside these countries."<sup>29</sup>

The development of a public rationale or declaratory strategy followed. Reagan's speech to the British Parliament in 1982, which he himself described as a source of the Reagan Doctrine,<sup>30</sup> set the tone, calling for a "crusade for freedom." In a 1983 speech at the Heritage Foundation, Reagan remarked,

In the Third World, in Afghanistan, in Central America, in Africa, in Southeast Asia, opposition to totalitarianism is on the rise. It may not grab the headlines, but there is a democratic revolution underway. ... We must go on the offensive with a forward strategy

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<sup>26</sup> *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties: Report of the Committee of Santa Fe* (Washington: Council for Inter-American Security, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 264; Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 22–23.

<sup>28</sup> *National Security Decision Directive Number 32: US National Security Strategy*, White House, May 20, 1982 (declassified in part in February 1996 and in whole in April 2005), <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=462986>.

<sup>29</sup> *National Security Decision Directive Number 75: U.S. Relations with the USSR*, Jan. 17, 1983 (declassified July 16, 1994), 1, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 107–108.

for freedom.<sup>31</sup>

A little more than a year later, in his 1985 State of the Union speech, Reagan declared that the United States “must not break faith with those who are risking their lives — on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua — to defy Soviet-supported aggression.”<sup>32</sup> The following year, in his 1986 State of the Union address, Reagan made this commitment:

You are not alone, Freedom Fighters. America will support with moral and material assistance your right not just to fight and die for freedom, but to fight and win freedom — to win freedom in Afghanistan, in Angola, in Cambodia, and in Nicaragua.<sup>33</sup>

Though the label “Reagan Doctrine” was not initially used by the administration, columnist Charles Krauthammer introduced it after the 1985 State of the Union address,<sup>34</sup> and it was soon adopted by administration officials, members of Congress, and others.

#### *Application in Nicaragua and Latin America*

Although the Reagan Doctrine was applied across the developing world, with U.S. aid eventually provided to insurgencies in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola, and Nicaragua, the most publicized and controversial application occurred in Nicaragua. Indeed, the initial efforts to aid rebels in Nicaragua in 1981 was inextricably linked to the development of the broader doctrine itself. In early 1981, the Reagan administration first cut off aid to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, accusing it of supporting leftist rebels in El Salvador. Then, in March of that year, the National Security Planning Group proposed a \$19.5 million covert program, which the president approved, to support domestic opposition groups in Nicaragua and to provide some funds to develop the anti-Sandinista forces gathering in Honduras. CIA Director Casey and Duane Clarridge, who was chief of the Central American Task Force at the CIA from 1981 to 1984, quickly expanded this initiative to develop and support paramilitary forces organizing in Honduras.<sup>35</sup>

At least initially, this limited Reagan Doctrine aid was linked to a diplomatic initiative led by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders. Enders attempted to use the

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<sup>31</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the 10th Anniversary Dinner, Heritage Foundation,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 19, no. 40 (1983): 1382–83.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 21, no. 6 (1985): 146.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 22, no. 6 (1986): 139.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine.” *Time*. April 1, 1985, 54-56, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,964873,00.html>.

<sup>35</sup> *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views*, US Congress, House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran and Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition, 100th Congress, 1st Session (H.Rept. No. 100-433; S.Rept. No. 100-216). Washington, USGPO, 1987), 31.



threat of American pressure and the promise of U.S. aid as levers to induce the Sandinistas to moderate their foreign policy and reduce their ties to the Soviet Union. However, the administration soon turned to a more aggressive application of Reagan Doctrine aid.

A National Security Council working group presented a number of options to the full council in November 1981. According to the leaked options paper, that list included military action against Cuba, an interdiction force in Nicaragua, paramilitary action to overthrow the Sandinista government, and limited political aid to Nicaraguan opposition groups.<sup>36</sup> After discussion, led by Casey, the members of the National Security Council agreed on the paramilitary option, and Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive-17, approving a \$19.95 million program to organize anti-Sandinista rebels against “the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support structure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America” on November 17, 1981.<sup>37</sup> On December 1, Reagan signed an intelligence finding authorizing the program and assigning the responsibility for the program to the CIA. Classified attachments to the directive also authorized the CIA to take unilateral action against the Nicaraguan government but were not submitted to Congress with the finding.<sup>38</sup>

### *Controversies*

Reagan Doctrine aid and rebel activity increased quickly, but soon triggered controversy and opposition within the U.S. government. Within the executive branch, hard-liners like Casey and members of the National Security Council, who were committed to a purist version of the Reagan Doctrine focused on overthrowing the Sandinista regime, clashed with pragmatists like Secretary of State George Shultz and other members of the State Department, who sought to blend Reagan Doctrine aid with diplomacy to reach a regional settlement. As the nature of U.S. involvement with the Contras was revealed, Congress became involved, with more liberal members strongly opposing the provision of Reagan Doctrine aid to the group. Opposition in the House of Representatives (led by the Democrats) and, to a lesser degree, the Senate (led by Republicans until 1987), triggered a complicated five-year interbranch struggle over the matter, with Congress first restricting, then banning, Reagan Doctrine aid from 1982 to 1984, only to reinstate limited “humanitarian” aid in 1985, and lethal Reagan Doctrine aid in 1986.

For the administration’s part, its commitment to the initiative led it to mislead Congress and the public about the policy and its purposes and then to take action to circumvent the restrictions and outright ban on aid when it was imposed. The commitment to the application of the Reagan Doctrine eventually led to the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the administration provided funds and

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<sup>36</sup> See Special to the New York Times, “C.I.A.’S NICARAGUA ROLE: A PROPOSAL OR A REALITY?” *New York Times*, March 17, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/17/world/cia-s-nicaragua-role-a-proposal-or-a-reality.html>.

<sup>37</sup> *National Security Decision Directive Number 17: National Security Decision Directive on Cuba And Central America*, Jan. 4, 1982 (declassified in May 2013), <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-17.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> See these documents in *National Security Archive, The Iran-Contra Affair: The Making of a Scandal, 1983-1988* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, 1990).



support to the Contras by secretly selling weapons to Iran and diverting the proceeds. In 1986 and 1987, revelations of this evasion of the legislated prohibitions on Contra support led to multiple investigations and, coupled with the loss of majority control of the U.S. Senate by Republicans in 1986, put Congress in the driver's seat on the policy, effectively ending Reagan Doctrine aid in 1987. Congress instead threw its weight behind the regional peace process initiated by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, which gave members of Congress a diplomatic initiative that did not depend on the Reagan administration. Although Congress authorized limited amounts of food and medicine in 1987 and 1988, administration efforts to continue, and even expand, Reagan Doctrine assistance, failed. In March 1988, six weeks after an administration request to renew Reagan Doctrine aid failed, the Sandinista regime and Contra leaders signed a ceasefire agreement.

In the final months of the Reagan administration, Nicaragua announced plans for elections, formed an electoral council, and announced its willingness to have international observers monitor the election. Two weeks after George H.W. Bush won the 1988 election, he, House Speaker Jim Wright, and newly designated Secretary of State James Baker crafted a bipartisan agreement that ended conflict over the Contra issue and committed the Bush administration to a policy of support for the planned elections in Nicaragua. Those elections were held in 1990, and the United Nicaraguan Opposition candidate, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, defeated Sandinista President Daniel Ortega. Ortega turned power over to Chamorro and ended the Nicaraguan civil war.

Even as the political controversy and struggle over the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua raged, other controversies arose as well. For one, the zeal for confronting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua led the United States to provide Reagan Doctrine aid to a resistance that lacked broad support in the population, was led by members of a despised military, often engaged in violence directed at infrastructure and civilian targets, and was seen as a creation of the United States. The cost of the Reagan Doctrine on the Nicaraguan people was heavy. Even when it was most potent, the Contras did not so much engage the Sandinista army as attack Nicaraguan infrastructure and society to make it ungovernable. The toll was measured in thousands of lives. Moreover, whatever its flaws, the target regime itself was neither put in place by foreign invaders nor a puppet of the Soviet Union. In fact, by ignoring the realities of governance issues in Nicaragua and human security concerns in the population, the application of the Reagan Doctrine often complicated the prospects for addressing U.S. concerns in the country and the region. Finally, there is little evidence that the Reagan Doctrine led to the settlement of the conflict or countered hostile Soviet intentions in the region. Indeed, U.S. assistance may have served to justify the militarism of the Sandinistas and deepen their dependence on the Soviet Union and Cuba more than to reduce it.<sup>39</sup> Also, it was only *after* Reagan Doctrine assistance ended that Central American states managed to settle the conflict themselves and the Sandinistas and Contras came to a cease-fire agreement, and this in spite of efforts to undermine the process by the Reagan administration. It is more likely that the commitment of the White House to the Reagan Doctrine delayed resolution of the conflict.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In addition to Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, see, for example, Robert Pastor, *Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 236.

<sup>40</sup> In addition to Scott, *Deciding to Intervene* and Pastor, *Whirlpool*, see also Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The*



## Legacy and Contemporary Implications

Two decades or so after the end of the Reagan Doctrine in Nicaragua, the United States continues to grapple with the tendency to impose its own ideological lens on the region, coupled with the failure to deal directly with real governance issues in the regions. The United States also still struggles with problems stemming from the “our backyard” perspective and the enduring relevance of the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary, in conjunction with the tendency to exaggerate U.S. capabilities to shape and control matters in the region. Moreover, the United States continues to be challenged by the shortcomings associated with its tendency to ignore the human security concerns of the Latin American people.

Now, as then, the current administration views the events and dynamics of the region through its own ideological interpretation. While the Cold War lens of the Reagan administration led it to the Reagan Doctrine in 1981, the exclusionary and muscular nationalism of the Trump administration colors its approach today. Just as in the 1980s, contemporary concerns over the growing influence of outsiders — China and Russia — and political approaches that fail to follow U.S. preferences generate confrontational rhetoric and actions, some of which seem bound to result in precisely the results they putatively seek to avoid. And once again, the United States is ignoring real governance issues and matters of concern to populations throughout Latin America, failing to appreciate local problems, perspectives, and challenges — such as serious popular unrest with democratic governance and the effects and inequalities of globalization and capitalism.

Meanwhile, U.S. popularity and prestige in the region has plummeted, as Latin Americans increasingly see the United States unfavorably.<sup>41</sup> In Mexico, for example, only 5 percent of those surveyed by Pew have a favorable view of America under the current administration, down from about 50 percent at the end of the Obama administration. At the same time, beyond confrontational rhetoric, anti-immigration policies, and hostility to free trade, the current administration seems uninterested in much engagement in the region. Yet, it views growing involvement of China and Russia with alarm, even going so far as to publicly invoke the Monroe Doctrine (much to the chagrin of Latin American leaders). The potent combination of waning clout, confrontational rhetoric and actions, and neglect has degraded U.S. relations in the region and opened the door to other countries to step in. As one journalist suggested, neither China nor Russia needs sharp power in the region, they have Trump.<sup>42</sup> China, in particular has taken advantage of the opportunity,

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*Making of American Policy in Nicaragua 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Frank McNeil, *War and Peace in Central America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988); and Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The U.S. and Nicaragua* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Pew Research Center data in Courtney Johnson, “Fewer People in Latin America See the U.S. Favorably Under Trump,” Pew Research Center, April 12, 2018, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/04/12/fewer-people-in-latin-america-see-the-u-s-favorably-under-trump/>.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Padgett, “China and Russia Don’t Need ‘Sharp Power’ in Latin America. They’ve Got Donald Trump,” on National Public Radio (WRLN in Miami, Florida), Feb. 8, 2018, <http://www.wlrn.org/post/china-and-russia-dont-need-sharp-power-latin-america-theyve-got-donald-trump>.



increasing ties and engagement in the region. Today, long after Ronald Reagan sought to respond to developments in the region with the Reagan Doctrine, the trajectory of U.S.-Latin American relations faces new challenges, but with similar overtones that call into question progress (or lack thereof) made since the 1980s. As the late Robert Pastor, a policymaker and scholar focusing on Latin America, once suggested of U.S.-Nicaragua relations, in many ways the United States seems “condemned to repetition.”<sup>43</sup>

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### 3. The Most Important Place in the World

*By Andrea Oñate-Madrazo*

In January 1981, when Ronald Reagan took the reins of the Oval Office, Central America was in a state of revolutionary ferment. A successful left-wing revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, coupled with left-wing armed insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala, led the incoming U.S. president and his closest advisors to perceive the isthmus as the most urgent and dangerous theater in the global Cold War. In the words of Reagan’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States.”<sup>44</sup> Within Central America, El Salvador seemed the next most likely candidate to succumb to a left-wing takeover. On the eve of Reagan’s inauguration, the revolutionary coalition Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), launched a wide-scale military offensive against the Salvadoran state, demonstrating that the guerrillas were a military and political force capable of challenging the country’s *status quo*. The Reagan administration wasted no time in sounding the alarm on El Salvador, and preventing a left-

<sup>43</sup> See Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition*.

<sup>44</sup> Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.



wing takeover in the smallest country in Central America became its top foreign policy priority: Over the course of Reagan's two terms in office, Washington dispensed more than a million dollars a day to fund a lethal counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador against leftist insurgents.<sup>45</sup>

Although Reagan promoted democracy as a panacea for the country's ills and bolstered moderates within the Salvadoran political Right, U.S. military assistance to the Salvadoran armed forces exacerbated the conflict in El Salvador and weakened civilian governments led by the very moderates the United States was attempting to prop up. In providing unprecedented amounts of aid to the Salvadoran army, the Reagan administration bears responsibility for the grave human rights violations committed by Salvadoran state forces during Reagan's two terms in office. Furthermore, the Reagan administration obstructed efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the Salvadoran civil war, helping to perpetuate a conflict that, between 1981 and 1992, left over 75,000 civilians dead and 20 percent of the country's population of five million displaced.<sup>46</sup> This article examines Reagan's policies in El Salvador during the 1980s and argues that by applying U.S. military force to what began as a national civil war, the Reagan administration is responsible, at least in part, for the scale of the war, its duration, and its lingering long-term effects.

## Getting Involved

The Salvadoran Civil War that ravaged the smallest nation in Central America from 1981 to 1992 was, at its roots, a national conflict. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, strong economic growth throughout Central America had generated pressures for social and political reforms that the ruling systems of the region — based on strong alliances between repressive militaries and reactionary economic elites — could not accommodate. The deeply inequitable nature of economic growth coupled with the continued repression of political opposition movements exacerbated polarization in societies that were already deeply divided. In El Salvador, conflict between antagonistic coalitions with dramatically divergent visions of the country's future erupted into a full-scale civil war in the 1980s. The first coalition, which Washington backed both politically and diplomatically, was made up of the military forces that pretended to embody “the state” and uphold “law and order.” These forces fought to maintain the *status quo* and protect the interests of the country's economic and political elite. Their national support base consisted primarily of business owners and landowners, the mainstream political parties, and the military apparatus. The second group, the FMLN, consisted

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<sup>45</sup> This statistic is provided by Greg Grandin in *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Holt, 2007), 71. In a secret memorandum from Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani to the U.S. Department of State, the following total sum is given: “The US has supported the Salvadoran Government throughout the ten year insurgency with economic and military assistance totaling more than \$3billion.” “Confidential Memorandum from Roy J. Stapleton to Brent Scowcroft: ‘Proposed Call on the President by Salvadoran President Cristiani,’” Digital National Security Archives, Jan. 22, 1990. Press correspondent for the *New York Times*, Larry Rohter, estimates that between 1980 and 1990 the United States gave the Salvadoran government \$7 billion to prevent left-wing guerrillas from coming to power. Larry Rohter, “4 Salvadorans Say They Killed U.S. Nuns on Orders of Military,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/03/world/4-salvadorans-say-they-killed-us-nuns-on-orders-of-military.html>.

<sup>46</sup> “Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador,” United Nations Security Council, April 1, 1993.



of the country's different leftist elements — guerilla movements, the Communist Party, and organizations of workers, peasants, and university students. This group claimed to champion the interests of the oppressed, repressed, and impoverished *pueblo salvadoreño* — Salvadoran people — by advancing social and economic justice. Although a national conflict rooted in local realities, the Salvadoran Civil War was, from its inception, entangled in the geopolitical web of the global Cold War and the Reagan administration threw the full weight of the United States behind ensuring the defeat of the FMLN and its allies in the region.

Historian William LeoGrande argues that the Reagan presidency did not constitute a watershed moment in terms of U.S. policy towards El Salvador. By the time Reagan came to office, LeoGrande argues, President Jimmy Carter had already established the pillars of U.S. policy towards El Salvador. After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Nicaraguan Revolution, Cuban and Soviet influence appeared to be growing throughout the Third World. Though it encouraged democratic reforms in El Salvador, the Carter administration subordinated these efforts to the overriding priority of thwarting revolution. U.S. officials sought to justify providing aid to a murderous regime by claiming, falsely, that U.S. assistance would improve the Salvadoran government's respect for human rights. To make U.S. aid to an authoritarian and homicidal regime more palatable to the U.S. public, the human rights improvements of the government of El Salvador would be vastly exaggerated. When Reagan came to office, he took these foreign policy positions and injected them with steroids.<sup>47</sup>

These continuities notwithstanding, both sides in El Salvador's conflict saw Reagan's arrival in Washington as a turning point. Salvadoran oligarchs and military officers followed the 1980 presidential election, cheering Reagan's electoral triumph as a *de facto* license to kill.<sup>48</sup> The Salvadoran FMLN also followed the U.S. elections closely. Their reaction to Reagan's victory was, not surprisingly, the opposite of the country's army and elites. When Joaquín Villalobos, one of the principal FMLN military commanders who led the 1981 offensive, was asked if Cuba and Nicaragua — the FMLN's most important foreign allies at the time — had pressured the Salvadorans into pursuing this military operation, Villalobos said that it was quite the opposite: "Cuba wanted us to wait to get more weapons and military training, but we felt a sense of urgency to act quickly. We felt that time was not in our favor. The right at home was becoming even more repressive and Reagan was about to come to office."<sup>49</sup>

The Reagan administration validated these expectations, announcing two months after Reagan took office that El Salvador would receive an emergency grant of \$25 million of military assistance as well

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<sup>47</sup> See, William M LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998); Benjamin Schwarz, "Dirty Hands," *Atlantic*, December 1998, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/dirty-hands/377364/>.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 172.

<sup>49</sup> Joaquín Villalobos, Interview with author, Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008. Regarding the strong ties between the FMLN, Cuba, and Nicaragua see Andrea Onate-Madrado, "The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations During the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-92" *Cold War History* 11, no. 2 (May 2011), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2010.545566>.



as twenty additional U.S. military advisers.<sup>50</sup> At the time, El Salvador's GDP was a mere \$3.449 million and the \$25 million sum was greater than all previous U.S. military assistance to El Salvador from 1946 to 1980 combined, as well as more than the total U.S. military assistance to the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean in 1981.<sup>51</sup> For the United States to supply the Salvadoran military with massive amounts of military funding and training, however, Reagan needed to secure support on Capitol Hill and coax the U.S. public to back — or at least not oppose — his policies.

The Democrats and some Republicans in Congress had grown increasingly uneasy with the Salvadoran military's gross human rights violations. Concern mounted drastically in December 1980 when four Catholic missionaries from the United States — including three nuns — were raped, killed, and thrown into a mass grave in the Salvadoran countryside by members of El Salvador's National Guard. The tragedy made headlines around the globe and horrified the U.S. public. Congress subsequently suspended military aid to El Salvador.<sup>52</sup> When Reagan took office a month later, he knew that, in order to get congressional approval to support the Salvadoran army, the armed forces in El Salvador would need to tone down their abuses. Because thousands of tortures, murders and human rights abuses were endorsed and carried out by hard-liners in the military and paramilitaries, members of the Reagan administration hoped that by propping up and supporting moderates within the Salvadoran Right they would secure the necessary support at home to pursue their policy abroad.<sup>53</sup>

## The Electoral Option

In 1982 and 1984 El Salvador held elections. The first were intended to select a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution that outlined how the election of a president, legislature, and local officials would subsequently take place. The second would enable the Salvadoran people to choose their first democratically-elected government since the early 1930s. In both instances, the Left did not participate and the United States supported the more centrist Christian Democratic Party over the radical right-wing parties of the military and the oligarchy, both of which had been

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<sup>50</sup> Prepared statement by Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams before a Subcommittee of the House Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee, Dec. 5, 1985, AFP 1985, 1087. Cited in Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 17.

<sup>51</sup> "Statement by Secretary of State George Shultz, Port-au-Prince, Haiti," Aug. 15, 1986, AFP 1986, 683–94. Cited in Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 17. For El Salvador's GDP at the time, see: "El Salvador GDP" at [Countryeconomy.com](https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/el-salvador?year=1981), <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/el-salvador?year=1981>.

<sup>52</sup> "U.S. Suspends El Salvador Aid After Slaying of Nuns: \$25 Million Cut Pending Probe Into Deaths of 4," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 5, 1980, A2.

<sup>53</sup> As part of the Salvadoran Peace Accords of 1992, a commission comprised of three international commissioners appointed by the United Nations Secretary General, was charged with investigating serious acts of violence occurring since 1980, the nature and effects of the violence, and to recommend strategies for promoting national reconciliation. Based on collected testimonies acquired between July 1992 and March 1993, the Truth Commission for El Salvador attributed 85 percent of the acts of violence to State agents. Approximately five percent of the acts of violence were attributed to the FMLN. See: "Truth Commission: El Salvador," United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1992/07/truth-commission-el-salvador>.



tied to death squads and the massacre of civilians. In both elections, U.S. support proved decisive and the Christian Democratic Party came out victorious.<sup>54</sup>

While able to secure the electoral victory of right-wing moderates, U.S. involvement also had the effect of weakening civilian political leaders in their attempts to bring the military under civilian control. As Napoleon Duarte, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party recalls, “U.S. pressure and U.S. aid, on a scale we never imagined, began penetrating El Salvador within a month after Reagan’s inauguration.”<sup>55</sup> Duarte thought this presented an ideal situation in which to push for reforms in the Salvadoran military, an archaic institution whose entire structure was geared toward peacetime, not fighting a guerrilla war. Duarte’s calls to use the massive amounts of U.S. military aid to reform the army fell on deaf ears. In his view, “as a junta, we had no chance of reforming the military bureaucracy or making the lower levels responsive to our orders. Our decrees on controlling the abuses of authority were never even transmitted to the local commanders.”<sup>56</sup> As he recalled, only one colonel in the National Guard, and one in the National Police, made efforts to discipline their men and weed out the most abusive under their command.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Duarte judged that, in dealing directly with the army, the United States weakened an already feeble civilian government. “When military aid was conditioned to human-rights improvements,” Duarte states, “the U.S. ambassadors became more powerful than I was as president. My complaints were less important than the ambassador’s, because he controlled the flow of money.”<sup>58</sup>

In El Salvador, as in every other country, a critical component of democracy rests on control of the purse strings being in the hands of the most immediate representatives of the citizenry. James Madison had made this explicit to an infant American Republic almost two centuries earlier.<sup>59</sup> In the case of El Salvador in the early 1980s, this control was, to an important extent, in the hands of a foreign power far removed from the Salvadoran people, leaving Salvadoran civilian government officials impotent to control their army. Thus, the Reagan administration’s efforts to strengthen Salvadoran right-wing moderates, while simultaneously propping up the army to defeat the FMLN, actually made governing El Salvador much more difficult for moderates and decreased the power of civilians within the government.

## Obstructing Peace

In addition to jeopardizing civilian control of the military, the Reagan administration was dogged in its opposition to any peace process in El Salvador that did not entail the military capitulation of the FMLN. In light of this, the United States sabotaged two serious attempts to bring the Salvadoran war to an end through a negotiated peace process. The first was the 1983 Contadora Peace Process,

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<sup>54</sup> For the 1982 elections see Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 288; and LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 160. For the 1984 elections see James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus* (New York: Verso, 1989), 409.

<sup>55</sup> Jose Napoleon Duarte, *Duarte: My Story* (New York: Putnam Adult, 1986), 168.

<sup>56</sup> Duarte, *Duarte: My Story*, 172.

<sup>57</sup> Duarte, *Duarte: My Story*, 172.

<sup>58</sup> Duarte, *Duarte: My Story*, 172.

<sup>59</sup> James Madison, *Federalist* No. 58, in Alexander Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet, 2003), 354–59.



an international effort to defuse Central American conflicts led by the presidents of Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Panama. While Washington outwardly professed its support for Contadora, it very rapidly set out to undermine it. In the words of then-Mexican Foreign Minister Bernardo Sepúlveda, “[P]ublicly, the United States supported us, but in reality, they implemented a very consistent boycott against our efforts.”<sup>60</sup> The Kissinger Commission demonstrates clearly how the Reagan administration went about sabotaging Contadora.

In July 1983, in the midst of the Contadora group’s dogged efforts to broker negotiations in the Isthmus, Reagan appointed a national bipartisan commission to evaluate the situation in Central America and draft policy recommendations. Chaired by former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, and the brainchild of neoconservatives Jeane Kirkpatrick and Sen. Henry Jackson, the commission was designed to rationalize U.S. policy in Central America and calm the debate at home over that policy — it was never intended to design a new policy.<sup>61</sup> Not surprisingly, the report put forth by the commission in January 1984 argued that the exploitation of Central American unrest by the Soviets and Cubans was at the heart of the problem and that turmoil in the region directly challenged U.S. national interests. Consequently, it called for increased U.S. military assistance to its Central American allies to defeat externally supported insurgencies and for what LeoGrande terms a “mini-Marshall Plan” of economic aid to address the region’s social and economic ills. Nevertheless, it was plain that military prerogatives took center stage.<sup>62</sup>

The commission also advocated implementing the “military-shield concept,” which consisted of the U.S. providing Central American allied governments with a military shield from their respective domestic oppositions so that they could feel secure enough to make the necessary changes to win over popular support. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was quick to point out, this notion was deeply flawed from the outset as “regimes requiring military shields against their own people are under siege precisely because they don’t give a damn about poverty and exploitation.”<sup>63</sup> The Kissinger Commission thus failed to account for the reality that, by bolstering militarism in the region, America was weakening the very moderate democratic forces that it purported to defend. Furthermore, the commission failed to account for the extent to which the United States’ meddling in Central American affairs heightened polarization and escalated conflicts.

It is worth noting that the flawed logic that underlined the Kissinger Commission’s “military-shield concept” was almost identical to the reasoning behind former President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, only this time it was directed solely at Central America rather than all of Latin America.<sup>64</sup> Had the Kissinger Commission’s members taken it upon themselves to learn a little bit

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<sup>60</sup> Bernardo Sepúlveda, Interview with author, Mexico City, Mexico, Aug. 3, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 238.

<sup>62</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 239–40.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Op-Ed: Failings of the Kissinger Report,” *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1984, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/00/11/26/specials/schlesinger-kissinger.html>.

<sup>64</sup> For further reading on the Alliance for Progress see Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999). And Thomas C. Field Jr., *From Development to Dictatorship: Bolivia and the Alliance for Progress in the Kennedy Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).



about the region's recent history, they might have found that the inherent contradictions of the Alliance for Progress — which advocated economic development while simultaneously strengthening the social forces most fervently opposed to that development — had, in fact, contributed significantly to the polarization that gave way to Central America's civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>65</sup>

Although the Kissinger Commission failed to have much of an impact on congressional debates in the United States, it did affect the course of the Contadora Initiative.<sup>66</sup> Whether intentional or not, the commission's work took the spotlight away from Contadora, and more importantly, it let Central American governments know that the Reagan administration planned to continue carrying out business as usual in the region — supporting counterinsurgency efforts and rejecting negotiated peace treaties that were not the product of the military capitulation of leftist insurgents. Secure in this knowledge, governments and militaries in the Isthmus were dissuaded from taking the Contadora peace effort seriously.

In October 1984, the Salvadoran Catholic Church mediated a second effort at securing peace through negotiations. In the Salvadoran town of La Palma, President Duarte, leaders of the Salvadoran army, and key military leaders of the FMLN sat down together, for the first time since the outbreak of Civil War, to explore the viability of peace. Within a few short weeks, both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government lost hope that any type of arrangement could be reached through negotiations.<sup>67</sup> The breakdown of talks was the result of a number of factors, both domestic and international, but central to their failure was the fact that Duarte's attempt to negotiate lacked the support of his primary international backer: the Reagan administration, which relentlessly pushed a military solution to the civil war and opposed any resolution that might legitimize the FMLN as a

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<sup>65</sup> In his exhaustive history of the Dominican Republic's Civil War in the mid 1960s, Piero Gleijeses describes this contradiction as the "catch 22" of U.S. development policy inherent in the so-called Alliance for Progress. The perceived threat of Castro-communism led the United States to launch a development program in Latin America that rested on social reforms and political democratization. This same perceived threat however, pushed the United States to increase support for Latin America's armed forces, which had historically opposed political democratization and social reforms. Development goals took a back seat to security concerns and above all anticommunism. Ultimately, the inherent contradictions of the Alliance for Progress worked to polarize politics in the region, closing off the possibility of centrist democratic alternatives. The "peaceful revolutions" in the Americas that the Alliance promised never materialized. Piero Gleijeses, *La esperanza desgarrada: la rebelión dominicana de 1965 y la invasión norteamericana* (Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011), 140.

<sup>66</sup> Historian William Leo Grande argues that the Commission's report did secure congressional support for Reagan's policy as the president had intended when creating the commission. LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 239.

<sup>67</sup> For further reading on the negotiations at La Palma see: Duarte, *Duarte: My Story*. This meeting was also widely covered by the international press. For example: Henry Trehwitt, "Salvador Rebels Get Talks Bid: Duarte Invites Guerrillas to Parley," *The Sun (1837-1991)*, Oct. 9, 1984. Alma Guillermoprieto Special to The Washington Post, "2 Salvadoran Civilians To Join Rebel Delegation: Armies, Politicians Form Coalition," *Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 1984; Paul Ellman, "Salvador Guerrillas Agree to Talk," *Guardian (1959-2003)*, Oct. 10, 1984; David Gardiner, "US Is Doubling Salvadoran Air Force Power: ON THE Eve of President Duarte's Meeting with Leaders of the FMLN Guerrillas in El Salvador, DAVID GARDINER Reports That Both Sides Seem Ready for a Long War," *Irish Times (1921-Current File)*, Oct. 15, 1984; "Issues and Forces at La Palma Meeting: THE LEFT THE GOVERNMENT," *South China Morning Post (1946-Current)*, Oct. 16, 1984, sec. OPED.



political force. In the wake of La Palma, the United States announced a program to double the airpower of the Salvadoran armed forces. The dramatic increase in air mobility came in tandem with the more than doubling of U.S. military aid to El Salvador — from \$81.3 million in fiscal year 1983 to \$196.6 million in 1984.<sup>68</sup> This sent a clear message to the Salvadoran military and right-wing forces, which were not exactly on board with La Palma, that the negotiations were a mere farce and that they could continue carrying out business as usual. And so they did.

The Salvadoran Civil War finally came to an end in 1992, through precisely the kind of negotiated peace process that the Reagan administration had aggressively opposed and jeopardized during the 1980s. The peace treaty, mediated by the United Nations, secured a more representative political order and electoral democracy in El Salvador, but the structural economic and social reforms that had been at the heart of the FMLN's platform were sidelined and, it was argued at the time, left to be resolved at the ballot box.<sup>69</sup> While the peace treaty terminated the gruesome twelve-year-long civil war, the terms of the armistice, which focused almost exclusively on democracy and market-driven economies, also helped to create conditions for some of the defining features of post-civil war El Salvador: widening socioeconomic disparities, chronic political weakness, and the emergence of transnational gangs — the recipe for a new model of violence.

## A Case of Amnesia

In October 2018, a caravan of approximately 7,000 refugees from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, who were fleeing violence and poverty, began an unimaginably arduous journey on foot from Honduras to the United States.<sup>70</sup> It is no coincidence that the migrants came from the three Central American countries that bore the brunt of the Reagan administration's involvement in the region in the 1980s. Unlike what Reagan and his closest advisors argued, the problem in Central America was not Cuba, and certainly was not the Soviet Union, but rather was rampant poverty and political and economic orders that not only exacerbated that poverty but also profited from it. In viewing conflicts in the Isthmus through a dogmatic Cold War lens, and placing blame for the rise of insurgencies on foreign involvement, Washington propped up brutal military regimes and weak civilian governments that defended exclusionary economic models of development. The large-scale Central American migration to the United States that the world is currently witnessing is not a new

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<sup>68</sup> David Gardiner, "US is doubling Salvadoran air force power: on the eve of Presidency," *Irish Times*, Oct. 15, 1984.

<sup>69</sup> For further reading on the peace process that finally put an end to the Salvadoran Civil War see: Tommie Sue Montgomery, "Getting to Peace in El Salvador: The Roles of the United Nations Secretariat and ONUSAL," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 139–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/166249>; Diana Villiers Negroponete, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Cynthia J. Arnson, ed., *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> Kirk Semple, "What Is the Migrant Caravan and Why Does Trump Care?" *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/world/americas/trump-migrant-caravan.html>. Madeleine Wattenbarger, "Caravan Migrants Carry Hopes Northward as Their Journey Resumes," *The Nation*, Nov. 14, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/caravan-migrants-mexico-north-journey-resumes/>.



phenomenon. The civil wars, economic hardship, and political instability of the 1980s drove thousands of central Americans northward, more than tripling the number of Central Americans then living in the United States.<sup>71</sup> Although political conflicts in the region ended in the 1990s, the legacies of the violence and instability of the 1980s continue to deeply affect the region. Moreover, the lack of economic structural reforms contributed to rampant poverty and lack of employment opportunities for thousands of Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans.

In response to the current migrant caravan, President Donald Trump sent armed troops to the Mexican border to ensure that these migrants are prevented from stepping foot on U.S. soil.<sup>72</sup> The administration has attempted to demonize the migrants, alleging that they include terrorists and gang members that will invade the United States if they are not stopped<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, the U.S. government has threatened to curtail foreign aid to the three Central American countries for failing to stop these people from leaving in the first place. In what can only be categorized as tragic historical amnesia, the countries that were once deemed the most important places in the world by President Ronald Reagan are now dismissed as places riddled with crime and “bad hombres.” Current U.S. policy toward the region, and particularly the Trump administration’s approach to the caravan, fails to account for the very real historic responsibility that the United States bears for the conditions now forcing thousands to flee their places of birth in search of a better life and, in many cases, simply a life.

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<sup>71</sup> Jeanne Batalova and Gabriel Lesser, “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” Migrant Policy Institute, April 5, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>.

<sup>72</sup> Michael D. Shear and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Trump Sending 5,200 Troops to the Border in an Election-Season Response to Migrants,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/us/politics/border-security-troops-trump.html>; Kate Abbott and Jeff Linthicum, “Trump Threatens to Send Troops to the Border and Cancel Trade Deal to Stop Migrant Caravan,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 18, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-mexico-caravan-20181018-story.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Adam Serwer, “Trump’s Caravan Hysteria Led to This,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/caravan-lie-sparked-massacre-american-jews/574213/>.



## 4. Reagan's Legacy: U.S. Support for Democratically-elected Civilian Governments

By Daniel W. Fisk

Elections in Latin America are once again making the news. Between November 2017 and November 2019, the region will have experienced 14 presidential elections and a notable number of votes for national assemblies. By the end of 2018, presidents will have been chosen by voters in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela. Even the region's Stalinist legacy government — Cuba — feels the need to engage in electoral appearances, as evident in the balloting held for officially-selected candidates for its rubberstamp national assembly.

From 1978, when only four Latin American countries were considered democracies, we have arrived at a point in history where elections in Latin America are considered routine, regardless of the political nature of a given country. With a few notable exceptions, electoral processes are regulated by constitutional time schedules, administered by impartial election commissions, and produce outcomes that have been deemed fair and competitive. In most countries, the ability of citizens to cast ballots occurs on a regular basis within generally accepted norms and procedures.

This region-wide circumstance is primarily the result of the actions and earlier sacrifices of the citizens of each country. It also is the legacy of U.S. encouragement and substantive assistance, from the 1980s and continuing through today — a legacy that owes much to President Ronald Reagan's policies regarding Latin America and the promotion of democracy.

### Latin America and the Caribbean at the start of the 1980s

As the 1980s opened, Latin America was a region known for its rule by *caudillo*, or strongman rule. Other than Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Peru, along with the Westminster-styled parliamentary systems scattered across the English-speaking Caribbean islands, the region was ruled by generals, military-backed strongmen, or by one party, such as Mexico's *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party/PRI). Mexico was unique as it held elections with the PRI candidate always emerging as the victor and, once installed in office, having “the powers of an absolute monarch — but only for six years.”<sup>74</sup> This structure earned Mexico the sobriquet of the “perfect dictatorship.”<sup>75</sup> In the cases of Colombia and Venezuela, with two of the oldest electoral traditions, the democratic process largely involved a self-selected group of elites taking turns being in power, reflecting more of a balance of power arrangement than a genuinely competitive process open to all philosophies.

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Reid, *The Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 73. [A 2017 edition is subtitled *A History of the New Latin America*.] Also see Enrique Krauze's masterful *Mexico: Biography of Power, A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

<sup>75</sup> A description attributed to Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa after an early 1990s visit to Mexico. It also is often attributed to Jorge Castañeda, a Mexican academic and political observer and a former foreign minister of Mexico's first genuinely elected democratic government.



The predominant structure in the region was that of a corporatist, national security state, with few opportunities for genuine citizen participation in governance or economic advancement outside prescribed parameters. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that these conditions made the region fertile territory for appeals to radical societal change, as seen in Cuba's revolution, idealistic notions of Marxism, and the Soviet Union's support for national liberation movements. Consider the region in January 1981:

- Castro's Cuba remained firmly in the Soviet camp and represented the spearhead and mastermind of revolutionary, anti-American movements throughout the hemisphere;
- Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua was moving in a Cuban direction, betraying the democratic promise that had inspired the popular removal of strongman Anastasio Somoza;
- El Salvador and Guatemala, both of which were ruled by the military or civilian frontmen, were the targets of guerrilla movements organized along Marxist-Castroite lines;
- Argentina and Uruguay were dealing with the experience of violent urban-based political movements espousing revolutionary alternatives to existing structures;
- Colombia and Peru were beset by guerrilla and revolutionary groups modeled on Cuban or Maoist philosophies; and
- The Caribbean, often a U.S. policy after-thought, seemed to be in revolutionary ferment, with Grenada, known (if at all) for its nutmeg production, under the rule of a People's Revolutionary Government, formed from the self-described Marxist-Leninist New JEWEL Movement with help from Cuba.

Candidate, and later President, Reagan's team interpreted the advances of Soviet-allied communism around the world, including in the Western Hemisphere, as the consequence of a series of self-inflicted setbacks resulting from America's "Vietnam syndrome" — a catch-all term for the crisis in confidence about America's role in the world, and the Carter administration's misapplication of human rights and misunderstanding of the differences in nature between traditional autocratic and radical totalitarian regimes.<sup>76</sup> As Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote in 1979, when she was a Georgetown University professor, "The foreign policy of the Carter administration failed not for lack of good intentions but for lack of realism about the nature of traditional versus revolutionary autocracies and the relation of each to the American national interest."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "A guideline text for the Reagan Administration had been an article by Jeane Kirkpatrick in the November 1979 issue of *Commentary* distinguishing between totalitarian regimes, which were Communist and invasive of individual rights, and authoritarian regimes, which were anti-Communist and less intrusive in nonpolitical aspects of individual life." George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 970.

<sup>77</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," *Commentary* (November 1979), as reprinted in Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorship and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: American Enterprise Institute/Simon and Schuster, 1982), 49.



The Cold War — specifically, the imperative of countering the Soviet Union and its regional ally, Cuba — was the Reagan administration’s framework for its approach towards Latin America and the Caribbean.

## Reagan Takes Office

Signaling a new, firmer policy direction against a Marxist tide in Latin America, Reagan hosted Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga in one of the first head of government visits to the White House. In Reagan’s words, this meeting represented an initial effort to “gradually take back the Caribbean which was becoming a ‘Red’ lake.”<sup>78</sup>

Administration outreach also commenced to the military governments in South America, which were seen as bulwarks against Marxist and Cuban-allied movements, including outreach to the militaries ruling Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. For example, applying Kirkpatrick’s analysis that anti-Communist authoritarian governments differed inherently from communist totalitarian governments, the Reagan administration set out to re-engage Chile through quiet diplomacy and positive measures. An early set of substantive measures included rescinding Carter administration restrictions on Chile receiving Export-Import Bank financing, ending U.S. opposition to multilateral development bank loans, opposing U.N. resolutions criticizing the human rights situation in Chile, and generally seeking areas to improve bilateral relations with the Chilean military.

The more immediate challenge emanating from Latin America arose, however, in Central America. By January 1981, Central America — Nicaragua and El Salvador, specifically — had already become ideological and political battlegrounds in both the Cold War and in the rivalry between the U.S. president and the Congress. In Nicaragua, Republicans and many neoconservatives understood Somoza’s fall in 1979 and the subsequent rise of the Sandinistas as the result of misguided Carter administration and congressionally-mandated human rights policies, as well as a misplaced assessment that the moderate opposition to Somoza provided a viable alternative to the more radical, better armed, Cuban-aligned elements.

The same situation that had occurred in Nicaragua was being repeated in El Salvador: A revolutionary coalition known as the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) had launched a “final offensive” in the fall of 1980 to take power “before that fanatic Ronald Reagan takes over the presidency of the United States.”<sup>79</sup> The FMLN was encouraged and aided by the Sandinistas and the Cubans.

In the weeks prior to the end of its term, the Carter administration responded to the FMLN’s renewed military actions by restoring lethal and non-lethal military aid to El Salvador. The Reagan team assumed office primarily defining the Salvadoran struggle in military terms, focusing its

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<sup>78</sup> Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries, Wednesday, January 28 [1981]* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> FMLN declaration as quoted in William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 69.



energies on security assistance and covert action combined with some symbolic gestures to encourage land reform. The U.S. Congress, led by Democrats in the House of Representatives, conditioned U.S. aid on human rights metrics, including reining in the Salvadoran death squads. Heated debates between the Reagan administration and Congress, and within Congress, ensued. The Reagan administration soon found that garnering support from skeptical members of Congress required more than the rhetoric that “El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts,”<sup>80</sup> or that “Nicaragua [is] a Soviet ally on the American mainland only 2 hours’ flying time from our own borders.”<sup>81</sup>

### “Democracy” and Elections

The Reagan administration viewed the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union as one encompassing diplomatic, military, economic, and political action — including public diplomacy activities.<sup>82</sup> This struggle was global and was as much about ideas as about traditional measures of national power. Cuba and its “destabilizing activities” in Central America and the Caribbean highlighted the need to counter and ultimately undercut Soviet imperialism. Consequently, the Reagan administration adopted as a national security strategy objective the “[n]eutralization and reduction of the threat to U.S. national security interests posed by the Soviet-Cuban relationship.”<sup>83</sup>

Reagan understood that “the only long-term solution [to Central America’s situation] was economic development of these countries, a better standard of living for their people, democratic rule, and more social justice.”<sup>84</sup> Bringing these elements together was at the core of the Reagan administration’s eight-year efforts in the region.

The Reagan inter-agency process had been developing ideas on how the United States could be more aggressive in engaging in a “war of ideas” with the Soviets and their allies and countering the notion that the Marxist model was better at addressing the challenges of development. Under the title “Project Democracy,” the U.S. administration set out a public diplomacy and programmatic initiative “consist[ing] not simply of outreach activities to shape foreigners’ opinions about the United States but of efforts to influence foreigners’ domestic political beliefs in ways favorable to U.S. foreign policy ... [including] getting foreigners to believe in democracy or to understand democracy better ... ”<sup>85</sup> This bureaucratic process paralleled a private initiative to establish an

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<sup>80</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America,” April 27, 1983, at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/42783d>.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” March 16, 1986, at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/31686a>.

<sup>82</sup> Norman A. Bailey, *The Strategic Plan that Won the Cold War: National Security Decision Directive 75* (Vienna, VA: The Potomac Foundation, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> Bailey, *The Strategic Plan*, quoting NSDD 75.

<sup>84</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 474.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Oakland University of California Press, 1993), 201.



independent, but government-funded, entity specifically to promote democracy outside the United States.<sup>86</sup>

Reagan clearly articulated the advancement of freedom and elections as a direct interest of the United States in his 1982 Address to Members of the British Parliament (known as the Westminster Address): “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings. So states the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, among other things, guarantees free elections.” He went on to propose that the United States proactively “foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”<sup>87</sup>

As evidence of the potency of the idea of people exercising their free choice through elections, Reagan pointed specifically to Central America:

More recently we've seen evidence of this same human impulse in one of the developing nations in Central America. ... [O]ne day those silent, suffering people were offered a chance to vote, to choose the kind of government they wanted. Suddenly the freedom-fighters in the hills were exposed for what they really are — Cuban-backed guerrillas who want power for themselves, and their backers, not democracy for the people. They threatened death to any who voted, and destroyed hundreds of buses and trucks to keep the people from getting to the polling places. But on election day, the people of El Salvador, an unprecedented 1.4 million of them, braved ambush and gunfire, and trudged for miles to vote for freedom.

They stood for hours in the hot sun waiting for their turn to vote. Members of our Congress who went there as observers told me of a woman who was wounded by rifle fire on the way to the polls, who refused to leave the line to have her wound treated until after she had voted. A grandmother, who had been told by the guerrillas she would be killed when she returned from the polls, and she told the guerrillas, "You can kill me, you can kill my family, kill my neighbors, but you can't kill us all." The real freedom-fighters of El Salvador turned out to be the people of that country — the young, the old, the in-between.<sup>88</sup>

Beyond El Salvador, the Reagan State Department came to understand that the existence and behavior of anti-communist Latin autocracies was one of the most powerful sources of recruitment for the Marxist Left, including Cuban-modeled guerrilla movements. The human rights community

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<sup>86</sup> Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 202-203.

<sup>87</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” June 8, 1982, at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/60882a>. The Westminster Speech framed the mission of the National Endowment for Democracy, of which the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute are two of its “core” program implementers.

<sup>88</sup> Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament.”



and especially the families of the “disappeared” in countries like Argentina could not be viewed as mere communist dupes when they were expressing genuine grievances against reprehensible acts by authoritarian states.

Aiding the transition from military rule to “democracy” thus became a diplomatic track of Reagan administration policy. This policy of democratic encouragement coincided with a “third wave” of democratization around the world, including an extensive regional political transformation in Latin America.<sup>89</sup>

A critique by Thomas Carothers of Reagan’s policy noted that the administration’s threshold for determining whether a country was “democratic” occurred when a government “came to power through reasonably free and fair elections . . . [that] the process of democratization in a country is the organization and implementation of a national electoral process.”<sup>90</sup> Carothers faulted this “elected governments equals democracy” criteria as it “ignored the crucial question of how much actual authority any particular elected government had” vis-à-vis other power groups or “the degree or kinds of political participation that [actually] existed.”<sup>91</sup> This criticism was fair as an immediate critique, but the Reagan administration deserves credit for supporting electoral processes that had to start somewhere in some format recognizable as expressing the popular will.

Regan’s administration did develop and implement new assistance programs, primarily through the Agency for International Development, to provide support to elected national assemblies and for the professionalization of judicial systems. Many of these programs continue to this day. In the early 1980s, though, they were secondary to the greater attention that was paid to elections. Elections were easier to “see” and more evocative — as Reagan outlined in his Westminster remarks about Salvadoran voters standing in line despite receiving death threats — than slow-moving technical assistance.

In the context of U.S. policy towards Central America, the visibility of electoral processes established the foundation within the U.S. Congress for continued support to counter guerrilla movements. For congressional Republicans and a segment of Democratic members, elections allowed for Central America to be debated in a different light: Aid to El Salvador, including military aid, was maintained. One consequence was the emergence of a stalemate on the ground in El Salvador that allowed for a negotiated end to the armed conflict and a means by which the Left could compete in national elections. In March 2009, the FMLN candidate was elected president of El Salvador, succeeded in office by another FMLN presidential candidate in 2014. In Nicaragua, where U.S. policy supported the *contras*, the armed opposition to the Sandinista government, and elections, a national vote in 1990 ended Sandinista rule and allowed for the disarming of those same *contras*. Sixteen years later, in 2006, Daniel Ortega, voted out of office in 1990, was returned to

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<sup>89</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>90</sup> Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 245.

<sup>91</sup> Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 245–46.



power through an electoral process. And in Guatemala, an electoral process started in 1984 created an incentive for civilian-elected governments to reach a settlement ending the longest of Central America's civil conflicts in 1996.

One of the most notable examples of the Reagan administration's evolution from support for military governments to support for electoral processes occurred in Chile. In 1970, the Popular Unity coalition, comprising several leftist parties, including the Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, gathered behind Salvador Allende for president and a platform offering "the Chilean path of socialism." Allende won and began implementing this platform, including a range of social and economic programs, including the expropriation of large estates and nationalization of selected industries. These actions, in combination with strong Popular Unity and Allende ties to Castro's Cuba, were interpreted as putting Chile on a course to be the next communist state in Latin America. In September 1973, the Chilean military took power, killing Allende in the process. Like many American conservatives, Reagan was initially sympathetic to the Chilean military's removal of Allende and his replacement by a junta led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet and this junta's embrace of free market economic policies. In a radio address in July 1979, Reagan praised Pinochet as having "set out to restore the economy of the nation [and] promised to restore democratic rule also and to allow elections." Pinochet's Chile, he said, "sounds like a nice country to be friends with."<sup>92</sup> As late as 1986, Reagan continued to describe Pinochet as having "saved his country."<sup>93</sup>

Early U.S. gestures to reset relations with Pinochet's government, however, failed to incentivize Pinochet to pursue democratic reforms. Instead, Pinochet sought to consolidate his power through a new constitution that included a provision allowing a plebiscite to affirm and extend his rule. Pinochet's name would be the only one on the ballot. State Department leadership (including Secretary of State George Shultz and Assistant Secretaries Elliott Abrams and Richard Shifter) recognized Pinochet's intransigence for what it was — a move to retain power — but also saw in it an opportunity: "Pinochet's constitutional ploy gave democratic forces within Chile something to work with and gave the United States something to support."<sup>94</sup>

With bipartisan congressional support — including appropriations to the National Endowment for Democracy earmarked to support Chilean democracy — the Reagan administration invested diplomatic and substantive resources in delivering a fair process. The Agency for International Development provided additional funding for voter registration. The result was a decisive "no" to extending Pinochet's rule. This victory belongs to the many courageous Chileans who stood up to Pinochet and set the stage for a democratic future. Considering where the Reagan administration began, and taking into consideration the multitude of factors behind its Chile policy revision, Chile is

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<sup>92</sup> "Chile, July 27, 1979," radio broadcast text, in Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson eds., *Reagan In His Own Hand* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 142–43.

<sup>93</sup> NSC Meeting, November 18, 1986 (Meetings File, NSC Executive Secretariat File), as quoted in Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 248.

<sup>94</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 971.

an example of how the Reagan administration's thinking transformed to view democracy as a more effective counterweight against communism than traditional autocratic allies.

### **The Reagan Administration Legacy**

Since the 1980s, the Latin American region has demonstrated a continuous commitment to the electoral model. Michael Reid, one of the most insightful observers of modern Latin America, has noted “the stubborn resilience of [the region's] flawed democracies.”<sup>95</sup> Continued use of largely free and fair electoral processes has been an essential element of this democratic resilience.

It is important to note, however, that elections are an essential, but not a sufficient, condition for democratic governance. Elections and electoral processes have been subject to manipulation. In Venezuela, plebiscites have been used to consolidate one-party rule; in Nicaragua, Ortega has abused the electoral process to create a modern structure that would be the envy of Somoza; and in Bolivia, elections have lent legitimacy to Evo Morales' efforts to close political space by exploiting the indigenous majority's anger over decades of elite corruption and mismanagement.

And yet, even in the face of setbacks, citizens continue to view elections as an essential element of governmental legitimacy. Elections have established strong institutional roots. In today's Venezuela — where power has been centralized in the president to the exclusion of other branches of government, where independent media has been effectively silenced, and where opposition political figures are harassed and imprisoned — elections are, ironically, the consistent mechanism by which these actions are affirmed and remain the preferred avenue for the emergence of an alternative leadership. In Nicaragua, as Ortega seeks to retain power, elections are being proposed as the way to break the current impasse over his continued retention of power.

In other countries, despite the continuing challenges of weak institutions and endemic corruption, elections have produced peaceful leadership changes in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, Panama, Argentina, and Brazil. In Mexico, the PRI's rule ended with the historic election of Vicente Fox as president in 2000. This has been followed by three subsequent competitive presidential elections and dutiful transitions. In Argentina, after 12 years of kleptocratic rule by Nestor Kirchner and his widow Cristina, voters in 2015 turned to a more centrist businessman for a political and economic course correction. In Colombia, the ability of members of the hemisphere's oldest guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), to participate in elections and to have a guaranteed ten legislative seats for participating, were highly controversial components of the peace agreement that formally ended a conflict that dated to 1964. By the time of the March 2018 vote, the FARC presidential candidate had withdrawn in order to recover from surgery, yet FARC candidates for the congress remained on the ballot.

Throughout Central America — even in countries torn apart by civil or political conflicts in the 1980s — elections are now the norm. With the challenges of post-conflict rebuilding, repeated

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<sup>95</sup> Reid, *The Forgotten Continent*, chap. 11.



natural disasters, and the emergence of transnational criminal organizations, the countries of the region continue to rely on elections to choose civilian leaders. While the region has a long way to go — particularly in crisis-ridden Venezuela — the remarkable progress that has been made across Latin America is an enduring legacy of the Reagan administration, as is the continuing U.S. policy to support electoral democracy throughout this hemisphere.

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## 5. When World (view)s Collide: Foreign Policy-Making in the Reagan Administration

*By Edward A. Lynch*

During the last weeks of his administration, President Ronald Reagan was often asked about any regrets from his time in office. The answer that he gave most often was his inability to convey to the American people the real stakes of the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union in Central America. Except for brief and fleeting periods of time, Reagan's determination to fight Communism and foster democracy in places like Nicaragua and El Salvador never enjoyed the support of a majority of the American people. Given the importance of the region to the Great Communicator, this failure of communication was hard to bear. One of the reasons that Reagan was so unsuccessful was the number of people in key policy-making positions in his administration who simply did not share his vision of a Central America made up of peaceful, democratic, and prosperous nations. Some administration officials, including some senior officials, preferred continued conflict and dependency in the region.

Most observers, now and at the time, realized that the Reagan administration had more than its share of internal divisions. As a consultant on Central America to the Office of Public Liaison, I was in a unique position to see the sharp and often bitter divisions that existed over what constituted the best course of action to counter Soviet and Cuban subversion in Central America. The president's Assistant for Public Liaison, Ambassador Faith Ryan Whittlesey, had made increasing support for Reagan's Central America policies a priority.<sup>96</sup> To that end, I was hired from the Heritage Foundation as a full-time consultant on Central America, and served in the White House in 1983

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<sup>96</sup> See for example Thomas J. Carty, *Backwards in High Heels: Faith Whittlesey, Ronald Reagan's 'Madam Ambassador' in Switzerland and the West Wing*, (Havertown, PA: Casement, 2012.)



and 1984. At the time, I was the only person there who worked on Central America full time. (Others in the building, such as Lt. Col. Oliver North, spent much of their time on Central America, but they had other duties as well.) In addition, the Office of Public Liaison convened a weekly meeting of an inter-agency task force to coordinate actions to drum up support for the president on this issue. The task force included the Office of Public Diplomacy in the State Department, the National Security Council (NSC), and the U.S. Information Agency. On most occasions, our meetings included recounting the intense bureaucratic struggles that the representatives from the State Department and the NSC were involved in, fending off interference from their colleagues who were pursuing their own Central America policies, which were at odds with those of Reagan. (One task force member, Constantine Menges from the NSC, wrote an entire book on how State Department officials tried to sabotage Reagan.<sup>97</sup>)

### **A Struggle Scholars Recognize**

These struggles were not simply turf battles, although then-Secretary of State George Shultz made it abundantly clear that he wanted no one else having anything to do with foreign policy making, least of all the NSC — Shultz writes in his memoirs that he tried to have the National Security Advisor report to him, rather than to the president.<sup>98</sup> The divisions over Central America reflected deep, incompatible differences of opinion about the basic direction of U.S. foreign policy. Although I use different titles to refer to the two opposing sides, noted below, the gap essentially mirrored the traditional academic categories of realism and idealism. The division over Central America was part of the more basic departure from existing U.S. foreign policy that Reagan made when he took office.

Since the end of World War II, U.S. presidents had embraced containment as the foundation of America's policy toward the Soviet Union and the Cold War. The policy assumed the permanence of the Soviet Union and, consistent with a realist approach, sought to use power to prevent the Soviets from expanding their influence. But containment also involved ceding to the Soviets all the territories they had taken over in the last months of World War II. Except for a brief period when President Dwight Eisenhower's administration spoke of "rolling back" the Soviets' dominion in Eastern Europe, no president from Franklin Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter made any serious effort to challenge the Soviets in an area where they were already dominant. From 1945 to 1981, while the U.S. government extolled the virtues of democracy, its main instruments for pursuing containment were levers of power. In much of Latin America, containment resulted in a preference for dictators who could be relied on to crush incipient communist movements, and whose heavy-handed rule would likely make them dependent on aid from the United States for survival.

Reagan, for his part, rejected containment, and did so in very clear language. In his commencement address at Notre Dame University in 1981, for example, Reagan said baldly, "The West will no

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<sup>97</sup> Constantine C. Menges, *Inside the National Security Council: The True Story of the Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988).

<sup>98</sup> George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 903.

longer contain communism.”<sup>99</sup> He rejected, presciently as it turned out, the permanence of the Soviet Union and would not accept the impossibility of flipping pro-Soviet nations to the American camp. Consistent with an idealist view of foreign policy, Reagan believed that the Cold War was primarily about ideas, about the relative merits of democracy and communism.

This difference of worldview plays a crucial role in understanding the Reagan administration’s divisions over Central America. When Reagan became president, the communist Sandinistas had already consolidated their rule in Nicaragua, but the pro-American government of El Salvador was locked in a brutal war with communist guerrillas supported by the Sandinistas, Cuba, and the Soviets. Faced with this situation, the Reagan administration almost immediately became split between those who wanted to contain communism in Nicaragua and those who wanted to extirpate it.

Indeed, some in the administration, especially in the State Department, viewed the ongoing threat of aggression from Sandinista Nicaragua as a positive development, since it made the rest of Central America dependent on assistance from the United States. It is worth noting that prior to the Sandinistas’ victory in 1979, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica received minimal amounts of aid from America, making them almost impervious to pressure from the U.S. government.

Realists believe that powerful nations like the United States ought to be able to compel smaller nations to support U.S. interests. Put differently, alliances ought to be based on leverage, so that compliance is assured and U.S. interests are paramount. Thus, I refer to realists in the U.S. foreign policy establishment as the “leveraged ally faction.” Reagan, Whittlesey, Menges and others in the Reagan administration, on the other hand, shared a focus on the ideal of freedom and self-reliance, and believed that democratic and free market-oriented nations would usually desire the same things as the United States, making leverage unnecessary. Moreover, prosperous nations, while less susceptible to pressure, would be in a better position to offer material assistance for a U.S.-sponsored foreign policy project. In other words, according to this group, free-market democracies are the natural allies of America, and thus, promoting democracy and capitalism is the best way to advance U.S. national interests. I refer to this second group as the “natural ally faction.”

### **Factions in El Salvador**

With such divergent worldviews, it is hardly surprising that the Reagan administration often seemed at cross purposes with itself. In dealing with the civil war in El Salvador, for example, the stark differences in policy orientation had immediate practical effects. The natural ally faction wished to provide military and economic assistance to the beleaguered government with large, multi-year commitments, so that the war could be won as quickly as possible. The ultimate goal of this faction was a democratic El Salvador. The transition to democracy was much more difficult with the war going on. For the leveraged ally faction, however, a democratic El Salvador, one that did not face a

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<sup>99</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address at the Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame,” May 17, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43825>.



large-scale communist threat, would need less American assistance, thus giving the U.S. government less leverage. Consequently, this faction insisted on small, incremental doses of aid, accompanied by onerous reporting requirements.<sup>100</sup>

The two factions also came to blows over the plans for land reform in El Salvador. While both agreed that skewed land-holding patterns were holding the country back, they had different solutions in mind. Both sides agreed that the largest estates should be broken up and that small-scale sharecroppers should own their own land instead of renting. But the leveraged ally faction embraced a plan put forward during the Carter administration that would have seized medium-sized farms devoted to cash crops and turned them into small plots for subsistence farming. Moreover, the leveraged ally faction insisted that the supposed beneficiaries of land reform not receive actual ownership of farmland. Instead, the Salvadoran countryside would be divided into farming cooperatives, worked by men and women who got a “permission to use” document rather than a deed. This part of the land reform plan became the subject of an intense debate within the administration, with the natural ally faction arguing that the negative impact on El Salvador’s economy would be nothing short of devastating. For the leveraged ally faction, however, such devastation would make El Salvador desperate for American aid even long after the guerrillas were defeated. The battle was won by the natural ally faction, and the most controversial part of the land reform plan was never implemented.

The difference between the two factions also appeared in stark relief during the 1983 Grenada crisis. The situation on the small island had been deteriorating since leftist Maurice Bishop seized power in 1979. Bishop’s October 1983 murder, at the hands of a rival who was even more pro-Soviet than he was, plunged Grenada into chaos. The matter was important to the United States for two reasons. First, Bishop’s government had been using Soviet money and Cuban military engineers to build a new airport capable of accommodating the largest Soviet aircraft, on an island uncomfortably close to sea lanes vital to American security and economic well-being. (American soldiers found enough weapons in Grenada to support major military operations, as well as documents that showed the Grenadians asking the Soviets for landing craft and airplanes for paratroopers.<sup>101</sup>) Second, the island was home to hundreds of American citizens, most of them young adults attending a medical school. The possibility that the students could be taken hostage alarmed policymakers from both factions.

However, the two sides proposed different solutions to the crisis. The natural ally faction, centered in the NSC, desired to use military force not only to evacuate the medical students, but also to crush the communist government and allow Grenada to become democratic. The State Department, headquarters for the leveraged ally faction, wanted to mount a rescue operation designed solely to evacuate the American students, leaving the pro-Soviet government in place. In the event, Operation Urgent Fury was launched according to the desires of the natural ally faction.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets and Central America* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 54.

<sup>101</sup> See *Grenada Documents: An Overview and Selection*, Government Printing Office, September 1984.

<sup>102</sup> Menges, *Inside the National Security Council*, ch. 2.



Had it gone the other way, Grenada would have been left with a staunchly pro-Soviet government that had every excuse to move even closer to the Soviet Union, having been “attacked” by the United States as a part of the evacuation effort. Moreover, it would have become a threat to its island neighbors, and even a cause for worry for Venezuela and Brazil. Most, if not all, of those nations would have had to come to the U.S. government for help, giving the United States leverage.

### **Factions in Nicaragua**

Nowhere was the battle between the two factions within the Reagan administration more pronounced and prolonged than over the issue of aid to the contras in Nicaragua. As with El Salvador, the natural ally faction desired that the aid be lethal and given in large amounts, while the leveraged ally faction once again insisted on incremental amounts of aid, accompanied by what one ranking State Department official referred to as “green eyeshade men” to ensure that every penny of aid was accounted for (a daunting task under the best of circumstances, and impossible for the contras.)

This difference of opinion over tactics reflected a complete divergence of views over the ultimate purpose of the contras. For the natural ally faction, which included Reagan himself, the contras were “freedom fighters,” who would, it was hoped, defeat the Sandinistas and bring democracy to Nicaragua. To that end, this faction sought to support home-grown contra leaders, officers who had the loyalty of their soldiers and the skills to win the war. For the leveraged ally faction, led on this issue by Shultz’s State Department, the contras’ purpose was to contain the Sandinistas, nothing more — thus, their preference for smaller and less dependable disbursements of American aid. It was this faction that insisted that the aid be covert, a decision that often prevented Reagan, and people like me in the Office of Public Liaison, from effectively defending the contras in the heated debates of the era. Without exception, the State Department made it clear that their preference was for contra “leaders” acceptable to Washington, although such leaders had little support inside Nicaragua.<sup>103</sup>

This division is a large part of the reason that administration statements on the contras were often contradictory and confusing. Working as I did in the Office of Public Liaison, I was often reminded, by both the media and concerned citizens, that what I was saying about Nicaragua did not match what others in the same administration were saying. Unlike the example of Grenada, the clash between the factions over Nicaragua was never really resolved. The natural ally faction won its biggest victory in 1986, when Reagan pulled out all the stops to win congressional approval of \$100 million in aid for the contras, a win that allowed the contras to make real headway in their war against the Sandinistas. The leveraged ally faction, however, won the next round, when Reagan was persuaded to make common cause with then-House Democratic Leader Jim Wright and embrace a peace plan that allowed the Sandinistas to remain in power. Even when the Sandinistas were voted out of power, overwhelmingly, in 1990, the leveraged ally faction in the administration of George

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<sup>103</sup> Conversations with the author by State Department officials, 1983 and 1984.



H.W. Bush was completely unprepared for the Sandinistas' defeat, and had assigned no ranking officials to Managua on election night. The victorious anti-communists were advised by former President Jimmy Carter to continue to treat the Sandinistas as the legitimate rulers of the country.<sup>104</sup> (The recent return to the presidency of Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista leader, is due in no small part to these machinations by the leveraged ally faction.)

## Factions Today

More recent events have demonstrated that the struggle between the natural ally and leveraged ally factions did not end with Reagan's presidency. Bush fought the Persian Gulf War in a way that left Saddam Hussein in power, but gave the United States unprecedented leverage over Iraq's neighbors. His son, by contrast, fought Operation Iraqi Freedom in a way designed to create natural allies. Indeed, President George W. Bush's Coalition of the Willing is a perfect real-life example of the value of natural allies. The persistence of the natural ally faction can be seen in the disastrous actions of the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) following the military campaign. Disaster, however, leads to dependence, which, in turn, gives leverage to agencies like the State Department and USAID.

The one goal that both the leveraged ally and natural ally factions have in common is a desire for greater U.S. influence around the world. Given this basic orientation, it was predictable that the struggle between these factions would largely go into abeyance during the administration of Barack Obama. Since Obama frequently seemed ambivalent as to whether U.S. global influence was a good or bad thing, the struggle for foreign policy dominance shifted to a see-saw battle between those who wanted greater U.S. influence, and those who saw retrenchment and a smaller international footprint as the better option. Time will tell whether the Trump administration will see a continuation of the divisions of the Obama years or a return to the more familiar realist-idealist divide.

## Conclusion

Since the United States became a global power after World War II, scholars have tried to discern and illuminate patterns in the crafting of U.S. foreign policy. When such patterns seem to disappear in a welter of policies that appear confused, counterproductive, and contradictory, scholars have been quick to conclude that policymakers are willfully short-sighted, ideologically rigid to the point of blindness, or arrogant to the point of outright stupidity. While such explanations can still serve as a last resort, I submit that looking for infighting between the factions I describe above will reveal much more deliberate patterns of decision-making. I believe that this is one of the most important lessons of Reagan's determined actions in Central America.

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<sup>104</sup> Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield*, 298–99.



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## 6. Reagan's War on Drugs and Latin America

*By Michelle Getchell*

“Drugs are bad, and we’re going after them,” Ronald Reagan declared during his first term as president. “We’ve taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we’re going to win the war on drugs.”<sup>105</sup> He wasn’t referring only to highly addictive drugs like heroin and cocaine, but also to marijuana, which he deemed “a dangerous threat to an entire generation.”<sup>106</sup> Reagan’s sense of moral certainty and his tendency to view the world in black and white manifested in the way his administration waged the drug war both at home and abroad. Embracing an overly simplistic notion of the problem, he targeted Latin American countries that were producing these drugs with crop eradication, and admonished Americans to “just say no,” enacting exceedingly harsh penalties for those who failed to comply. It has now been over three decades since Reagan pledged to win the drug war, and yet the trafficking of heroin and cocaine continues to be a monumentally profitable and violent criminal enterprise that wreaks havoc on some of the world’s most vulnerable populations. The United Nations estimates that between one fifth and one third of the income of transnational organized crime groups comes from the production and trafficking of drugs.<sup>107</sup> While the prohibitionist approach clearly failed to eliminate the scourge of drug trafficking, it was highly successful in creating a domestic political environment conducive to the pursuit of counterinsurgency in Latin American countries at a time when the support of the American public for Cold War military interventions was at an all-time low.

### The War on Drugs

Though a prohibitionist ethos had already permeated the U.S. government’s official attitude toward narcotics, and punitive measures had been implemented long before Richard Nixon’s rise to power,

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<sup>105</sup> Radio Address to the Nation on Federal Drug Policy, October 2, 1982, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1982, Volume II, 1253.

<sup>106</sup> Reprint of a radio program entitled “Marijuana,” Folder: Taping—1977, May 25, “Marijuana” Reprint 4/4, Box 10, Pre-Presidential Papers, Series I: Speeches and Writings, Sub-series A: Radio Broadcasts, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California [hereafter, RRPL].

<sup>107</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, World Drug Report 2017, Pre-briefing to the Member States, Vienna, 16 June 2017, [https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/field/WDR\\_2017\\_presentation\\_lauch\\_version.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/field/WDR_2017_presentation_lauch_version.pdf), accessed Aug. 9, 2018.



Nixon was the one to formally declare a war on drugs. For him and other conservative culture warriors, the “get-tough” approach to crime and drugs was a response to the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As racial tensions erupted into riots in the inner cities, and massive anti-Vietnam war protests opposed U.S. foreign policy, drug use became inextricably linked in the public imagination with radical students, urban blacks, and the counterculture. Just as the Nixon administration sought to deflect responsibility for atrocities committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam by blaming it on drug use, U.S. officials located the source of domestic opposition to the power structure in the abuse of mind-altering drugs.<sup>108</sup> In subsequent decades, the war on drugs was waged by a number of powerful interests: politicians on both sides of the aisle looking to score with their constituents, presidents in need of a scapegoat issue, prison guards’ unions, private companies with a financial stake in punitive measures, concerned parents of unruly teenagers, and a profit-driven news media seeking good copy.

It was Reagan who revived the war on drugs, which for all intents and purposes, had become moribund under the administration of President Jimmy Carter. Though Carter decided not to wage the domestic drug war, choosing instead a “harm reduction” approach that sought to provide medical and psychiatric treatment to addicts, supply-side anti-narcotics efforts continued. Supply-side policies essentially placed the responsibility for domestic drug use on the countries supplying the drugs, many of which complained that the United States was blaming them for its social ills. These efforts became the primary focus of the Reagan administration’s drug war in Latin America. At the same time, Reagan abandoned the Carter administration’s focus on medical treatment for addicts in favor of a punitive approach that in some cases constituted cruel and unusual punishment.<sup>109</sup> Though it is difficult to determine how personally invested Reagan was in the drug war, it was certainly consistent with his own deeply held sense of American identity, traditions, and values.

### **The Politics of Narcoterrorism**

The punitive approach to drugs was not just a domestic phenomenon. It was reflected in the Reagan administration’s supply-side anti-narcotics foreign policies, which sought to eliminate the supply of drugs at the source. In Latin America, this involved the extensive use of herbicides, usually applied aerially, to destroy opium, marijuana, and coca crops. Because virtually all the world’s cocaine is processed from coca grown in the Andes, the countries of Peru and Colombia were among the highest priority targets of crop eradication. These two countries also suffered from the depredations of radical left-wing guerrilla movements that exerted increasing control over drug production and trafficking. The supply-side strategy therefore aimed to strengthen the Peruvian and Colombian armed forces in their struggle against the guerrillas.

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<sup>108</sup> See Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Violations in the United States, Vol. 9, No. 2 (B), March 1997, “Cruel and Unusual: Disproportionate Sentences for New York Drug Offenders,” <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/usny/>, accessed 7 November 2018.



Not only did the supply-side approach empower the armed forces and security services of these countries, contributing to escalating human rights abuses, it was demonstrably ineffective. The so-called “balloon effect” meant that alternate sources of supply kept popping up. As long as the demand for drugs exists, people will find a way to supply them. Ironically enough, given his devotion to free market principles, Reagan seems to have never acknowledged this fact. But if the drug war wasn’t successful in actually reducing the demand for and supply of drugs, it proved useful in myriad other ways, most notably in developing the discourse around “narcoterrorism.”

The concept of “narcoterrorism” emerged in the highly politicized context of the Cold War. The Reagan administration accused Cuba and Nicaragua, the two avowedly Marxist-Leninist regimes in Latin America, of smuggling drugs into the United States to destabilize American society and then using the profits to finance Marxist revolution in the Western Hemisphere. Circumstantial evidence of the involvement of corrupt Cuban and Nicaraguan officials in the drug trade did emerge, but there was no evidence to suggest that it was systematic or pursued as a matter of policy. In fact, the evidence of Cuban and Sandinista complicity in the drug trade was identical to the evidence of drug trafficking by the right-wing counterinsurgency forces — the “Contras” — battling the Sandinistas. However, the Reagan administration dismissed these charges out of hand. Funding the Contras was one of Reagan’s pet projects, and his administration continued to provide them with military and humanitarian support even after Congress had passed numerous restrictions on such funding, and after allegations of the Contras’ involvement in drug trafficking became public.<sup>110</sup>

While the “narcoterrorism” label initially served as a rhetorical weapon with which to attack Cuba and Nicaragua, it evolved as a way to portray communist insurgencies in Latin America as a national security threat to the United States.<sup>111</sup> The previously distinct dangers of communist insurgency and drugs became inextricably linked in the public imagination when, in November 1985, *Movimiento de 19 Abril* guerrillas infiltrated the Colombian Palace of Justice. They took the entire Colombian Supreme Court hostage and destroyed documents, including U.S. extradition requests for major drug traffickers. Allegations emerged that Pablo Escobar, head of the notorious Medellín cartel, had paid the guerrillas nearly a million dollars for the attack. Less than six months later, National Security Decision Directive 221 declared drugs a national security threat, widening the scope of military involvement in the drug war and linking counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics in official U.S. policy for the first time.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> See “Documentation of Official US Knowledge of Drug Trafficking and the Contras,” The Oliver North File, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 113, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/>, accessed Aug. 16, 2018.

<sup>111</sup> See Michelle Denise Reeves (Getchell), “The Evolution of Narcoterrorism: From the Cold War to the War on Drugs,” in Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Mark A. Lawrence, and Julio Moreno, eds., *Beyond the Eagle’s Shadow: New Histories of Latin America’s Cold War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 281–306.

<sup>112</sup> NSDD 221, Narcotics and National Security, April 8, 1986, National Security Policy Papers, 1981-1989, NSDDs 221-230, RRPL.



The Reagan administration used the term “narcoterrorism” as shorthand for the relationship between narcotics traffickers, political terrorists, and leftist guerrilla movements. From the outset, however, this relationship was poorly defined. While the traditional definition of terrorism focuses specifically on a group’s political aims, the term “narcoterrorism” was used to designate three distinct phenomena: the use of terror by narcotics traffickers to intimidate political authorities; the use of drug profits by insurgents to finance terrorist acts aimed at generating political outcomes totally unrelated to narcotics; and the logistical network through which drugs and profits flowed. The rhetoric of “narcoterrorism” completely failed to distinguish between the tactics and the goals of its practitioners. By using the term in an indiscriminate fashion, U.S. officials and the news media elided the crucial distinction between drug profits as an end and as a means to an end.<sup>113</sup>

This conflation of the threats posed by drug trafficking and leftist insurgency allowed the Reagan administration to provide counterinsurgency support to Latin American governments even in the restricted atmosphere of the post-Vietnam era, when Congress and the American public were wary of being sucked into another Third World quagmire. Especially as relations between the United States and the Soviet Union began to improve during Reagan’s second term, fears of communist subversion no longer animated the American people. The specter of violent street crime perpetrated by junkies, however, haunted the breakfast table with every newspaper headline, and the dinner table with every evening news broadcast. Although levels of violent crime and drug use remained relatively steady throughout the decade (i.e., impervious to the strenuous efforts of the drug war), mainstream news media coverage of it skyrocketed.<sup>114</sup> This threat of a domestic drug crisis helped Reagan shore up public support for his military activities in Latin America. The “drugs as national security threat” paradigm provided the impetus for continued, and even increased, military funding in an atmosphere of uncertainty created by the drawdown of the Cold War.

## Conclusion

The supply-side narcotics control efforts spearheaded by the Reagan administration continue to define the U.S.-led international drug war today. The prohibitionist ethos has contributed to the further destabilization of Latin American societies, siphoning resources away from the types of reforms that are needed to enhance democracy and prosperity in the region. Central America, as the main vector of cocaine that is smuggled from the Andes to North America, is among the most violent areas in the world today, with some of the highest homicide rates. These escalating crime levels negatively impact economic growth and democratic development, while eroding respect for the rule of law.<sup>115</sup> Judicial reforms are needed in order to root out the political corruption that allows

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<sup>113</sup> See Michelle Denise Reeves (Getchell), “Narcoterrorism: How Real is the Threat?” In Frank Shanty, ed., *Counterterrorism: From the Cold War to the War on Terror, Volume One: Combating Modern Terrorism, 1968-2011* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012).

<sup>114</sup> See Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>115</sup> See Francisco Rojas Aravena, “Democracy, Security, and Organized Crime in Central America,” in *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*, ed. Bruce M. Bagley and Jonathan D. Rosen (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 276–92.



narco-traffic to flourish, while domestic efforts in the United States should be focused on reducing demand and treating addiction. However, the reproduction in the United Nations and the Organization of American States of the harsh U.S. punitive regime removes the option of member-states to implement policies experimenting with decriminalization or legalization.<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, the supply-side strategy pioneered by the Reagan administration has exacerbated regional instability while utterly failing in its goal of eliminating — or even reducing — the production, trafficking, and consumption of narcotics.

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<sup>116</sup> Bruce M. Bagley, “Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Democracy,” in *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*, ed. Bagley and Rosen (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 15–16.