We will be known by the company we keep:

Lessons from US-Latin America Policy for the post-September 11th World

by Hugh Byrne
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1. Introduction

The United States has launched a war on terrorism in response to the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11. The Bush administration has made the defeat of terrorism its central focus and has predicted a long conflict conducted mainly in the shadows against a stealthy and resourceful enemy. President Bush has told other nations that “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” and has indicated that support in the campaign against terrorism will be a defining factor in a nation’s relations with the United States. In this context, it is helpful to look back at another unconventional conflict—U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War in Latin America. Reflection on that period points out clear dangers in the current approach—and lessons that can be drawn from that earlier experience.

In the aftermath of September 11, there is an unquestionable, urgent need to bring to justice those responsible, prevent further attacks and address the roots of terror in the world today. While preventing future terrorist acts must be a priority for the United States, there are also potential dangers in the current U.S. approach to combating terrorism. Long-term U.S. interests and values must be embraced and promoted in our efforts to stop terror. Perceived short-term benefits must be weighed against their long-term costs. For example, if support is given to regimes that are helpful in the campaign against terrorism but which repress their citizens and violate fundamental human rights, there will be significant costs, as U.S. support may then strengthen these regimes and undermine democratic movements in these countries. If the United States does not place democracy and human rights at the center of its policies, the struggle against terrorism will not achieve the goal of making our nation safe.

Already the United States is building new relationships with undemocratic regimes such as those of Uzbekistan and Pakistan, which border Afghanistan and offer military bases for the war. Russia’s human rights violations in Chechnya have been played down as cooperation against terror has increased. The harsh Islamist regime in Sudan is supporting U.S. intelligence efforts and is seeking a new relationship with the United States. A range of other candidates have been put forward as potential allies in the current war on terrorism, while undemocratic regimes which are long-time friends of the United States, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are key partners in the broad coalition being built against terrorism.

There are changing policies on the home front as well. New funds are being provided for the CIA; restrictions on intelligence activities designed to protect human rights have been lifted; and there have been discussions about permitting the CIA once again to engage in assassinations. The administration has also taken actions that have raised concerns that civil liberties are being eroded—for example, with the detention of hundreds of individuals without charge in the aftermath of September 11, the President’s executive order permitting trial by U.S. military tribunals of foreign nationals suspected of terrorist offenses, and proposals to allow increased surveillance of religious and political groups in the United States. In introducing its World Report 2002, Human Rights Watch warned:
“Some countries, such as Russia, Uzbekistan, and Egypt, are using the war on terror to justify abusive military campaigns or crackdowns on domestic political opponents. In the United States and Western Europe, measures designed to combat terrorism are threatening long-held human rights principles.”

Concerns about the dangers that may arise from an overarching war on terrorism are not purely speculative. There is a powerful recent precedent—the Cold War struggle against Communism—from which valuable lessons can be drawn. In the aftermath of the collapse of Communism, there is a tendency to view U.S. actions taken during that conflict as necessary contributions to the effort to undermine a repressive and undemocratic system. But in the process, successive U.S. administrations carried out activities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which undermined American values and principles. This article will focus on Latin America, where the consequences and lessons from an overarching struggle against Communism were demonstrated in clear and tragic ways.

Over a period of four decades, in the name of waging a global struggle against international Communism, the United States allied itself with numerous repressive regimes that were gross violators of human rights; carried out or sponsored invasions of nations identified by the United States with Communism (Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Grenada); worked to foment a military coup to overthrow the elected government of Chile; supported the military coup in Brazil in 1964 and worked with authoritarian governments in the Southern Cone that were engaged in hunting and killing leftist opponents; trained military and police forces that went on to commit massacres and numerous death squad killings (El Salvador, Guatemala); armed counterrevolutionaries (known as contras) in Nicaragua who carried out terrorist attacks against civilians; mined harbors in Nicaragua in breach of international law; provided manuals that taught abusive and anti-democratic practices; secured illegal funding for the contras when Congress cut off aid; and subverted the Constitution in swapping arms for hostages in Iran and giving the proceeds of the sales to the contras.

The consequences of these and similar actions were enormous: wars that might have been ended through negotiations were prolonged in the 1980s, resulting in hundreds of thousands of lives lost in Central America, millions of refugees, and grave economic costs to the nations of the region and their people. Divisions with European allies deepened. U.S. values—such as support for democracy and human rights—were undermined. The Constitution was subverted. Ultimately, U.S. policies undermined the struggle against Communism: U.S. support for repressive regimes—that targeted centrist as well as leftist opponents and pushed many democratic opponents toward revolution as the only viable avenue for needed change—contributed to increased instability and social upheaval, and identified this country with the actions of its Latin American allies. In siding with corrupt dictators and egregious human rights violators, the United States gave the Soviet Union a low-cost way of convincing Latin Americans that it was really on the side of freedom and social justice—despite its own highly repressive system.

There are important lessons for the current struggle against terrorism to be drawn from four decades of U.S. Cold War involvement in Latin America.

We will be known by the company we keep:

If the United States develops close relations with unsavory regimes in central Asia and elsewhere, we will be identified, as we were in Latin America, with their actions—with significant long-term consequences if the United States comes to be viewed as an ally of dictators and an opponent of the aspirations of people working for democracy and human rights.

Don’t turn a blind eye to human rights violations:

Support for democracy and human rights is a crucial component of the long-term struggle against terrorism, since the creation of open societies where rights are respected is the best antidote to the appeal of extremist movements. Human rights and democracy should not be seen as a nuisance or an afterthought, nor should they be traded off against intelligence support or military bases in the struggle to combat terrorism.
Oversight of government activities is essential:
Every administration wants unquestioned power at a time of crisis. But as the experience of Central America in the 1980s showed, close congressional oversight of administration activities and informed public debate are essential if actions that undermine U.S. interests and values are to be avoided—or brought to light.

Keep close tabs on the CIA:
While there is a genuine need to improve intelligence on terrorist networks, the CIA should not be given carte blanche to engage in the kinds of activities that violated human rights and caused embarrassment in the Cold War years. Limitations on working with known human rights violators are justified, and strong oversight mechanisms are essential to ensure that the United States does not become complicit in the crimes of its ‘assets.’

Be careful what we leave behind: Weapons and training skills have a long shelf life.
The U.S. experience in Latin America shows that weapons and training transfers can have unintended consequences. Transfers provided for one purpose can be used to pursue ends that do not coincide with U.S. foreign policy goals. The United States, for example, is still concerned about possible use of the stinger missiles we provided the Mujahadeen years ago.

Domestic dissent is not the enemy:
President Bush has told other nations that “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” and public and congressional support for the president and his administration’s actions against terrorism are currently at very high levels. Attorney-General John Ashcroft has equated opposition to administration policies with giving support to terrorism. In order to support our American values, it is important that in the fervor to defeat terrorism, those who believe war is not the appropriate response to the attacks of September 11 or who speak out in favor of civil liberties and human rights considerations not be seen as part of the ‘enemy’ to be defeated.

Don’t be ‘penny wise, pound foolish’ with peace:
The Bush administration and Congress appear to have learned some lessons from the failure to support peace and development in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet forces. It is important that the United States play a robust role in supporting reconstruction and development in Afghanistan in the years ahead. Aid programs that support institutional change can mean the difference between securing peace in a post-war environment and leaving disillusioned people ready for the next conflict.

Investing in people helps cut terror at the roots:
While tough law enforcement action against terrorists is essential, the most sustainable way to combat broader support for terrorist activities is to address the conditions that help foster it—poverty, lack of social and economic development, and undemocratic and repressive regimes that leave their citizens scant hope of bettering their lives, and hence open space for those offering extreme alternatives. Today, increasing U.S. investment in democracy and development is crucial to address the conditions that provide fertile ground for terrorist recruitment.

As the United States embarks on an irregular war against terrorism, learning the lessons from the recent history of U.S. involvement in a long war with many parallels may help avoid tragic repetitions of the past. The following section provides a brief background on U.S. Cold War involvement in Latin America, short case studies of the U.S. role in Guatemala, Chile, Nicaragua and El Salvador, and some conclusions regarding the costs and consequences. The final section draws out lessons from Latin America for current U.S. efforts to combat terrorism.
2. The Cold War in Latin America

From the early 19th Century, the United States defined Latin America as within its sphere of influence. President Monroe in 1823 declared the American continents “are henceforth not to be considered as subject for future colonization by any European power.” In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt stated that “flagrant cases of ... wrong doing and impotence” would force the United States to intervene in the affairs of the nations of Latin America to exercise an “international police power.” Between 1898 and 1934, the United States intervened militarily more than 30 times in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. The promotion of democracy was an important justification for intervention, but as one commentator has noted, “From the 1830s to the 1930s, despite high-minded rhetoric and ostensible nobility of purpose, not a single U.S. intervention led to installation of democracy in Latin America.” More important were stable governments that protected U.S. economic interests; the interventions also demonstrated clearly to outside forces which power was dominant in the hemisphere.

With the end of World War II and the opening of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and its allies, U.S. administrations continued to view Latin America as a U.S. sphere of influence and saw any gains by leftist forces in the region as a loss in the worldwide struggle between Communism and democracy. Communist or leftist movements had to be prevented from coming to power, and if they succeeded, had to be overthrown. This could best be done by providing support to traditional power holders in the region—particularly through economic aid, military equipment, and the training of military and police forces. While in the abstract a democratic regime might be preferable to a dictatorship, in practice, as George Kennan, the celebrated originator of the doctrine of containment, noted: “It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists.”

In 1954 the CIA organized an invasion force to overthrow Guatemala's president Jacobo Arbenz, whose government was seen by the Eisenhower administration as being “penetrated by Communists.” Following the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959, the urgency to prevent further revolutions became more intense. An effort was made in the 1960s with the Alliance for Progress to help generate economic development and social reforms to stave off revolution in Latin America, but by the mid-1960s the developmental and democratic components of the Alliance had taken a back seat to counterinsurgency strategies to defeat left-wing movements. Between 1961 and 1966, militaries overthrew nine governments in Latin America, and in so far as they brought stability, the new regimes were viewed favorably in Washington. After the military overthrew a somewhat liberal government in El Salvador, President Kennedy noted: “Governments of the civil-military type of El Salvador are the most effective in containing communist penetration in Latin America.”
From the 1950s, military officers from throughout Latin America were trained in counterinsurgency warfare at the School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone. Many graduates went on to become notorious human rights violators and to overthrow governments, such that the school came to be known as the School of the Golpes. U.S. advisers also trained police and military forces in-country in internal security as part of the U.S. International Cooperation Administration Public Safety Program. In Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. advisers helped put in place intelligence and communications systems and paramilitary networks that would facilitate and organize the massive repression of the late 1970s and the 1980s.

In contrast to Central America and the Caribbean region, the United States was able to avoid direct military intervention in South America by supporting and working closely with military regimes in their hard-line responses to any threats to stability from the left. The greatest perceived threat to U.S. interests came with the election of a Marxist, Salvador Allende, to the presidency of Chile in 1970. The Nixon administration used economic, political, and diplomatic pressure as well as covert action to build opposition to Allende, and encouraged the Chilean military to end its century-old commitment to constitutional government in Chile, which it did by overthrowing the government on September 11, 1973. It would be seventeen years before democracy was restored in Chile.

In Central America, historically a sphere of more direct U.S. influence and control, successive U.S. administrations worked with and through traditional regimes that were based on alliances between the military and economic elites, until key allies were challenged by popular and guerrilla movements, and unraveled in the late 1970s. President Jimmy Carter’s administration initially gave a higher priority to democracy and human rights in Latin America and put greater distance between the United States and repressive governments in Central America. But in 1979, following revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, more traditional anti-Communist approaches to the region came to dominate within the Carter administration, and led the United States to rely on conservative elements in the Salvadoran military to prevent a leftist victory.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, Central America became the centerpiece of the administration’s struggle in the Third World against the Soviet Union. Jeane Kirkpatrick, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, called Central America “the most important place in the world for the United States today.” Throughout President Reagan’s two terms, his administration saw as major priorities the overthrow of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the defeat of leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

U.S. involvement in the politics of four nations of Latin America—Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador and Nicaragua—demonstrates many of the problems of U.S. policies in Latin America in the Cold War years, and points to possible lessons for the struggle against terrorism today.
The U.S. role in Guatemala is one of the most tragic chapters in the history of U.S. involvement in Latin America in the Cold War period. A coup organized by the CIA against a leftist, nationalist government inaugurated four decades of repressive government. Political space was closed, helping spur the creation of a rebel insurgency and the launching of a thirty-six year armed conflict in which some 200,000 people were killed, over 90 percent at the hands of state forces. A United Nations-sponsored truth commission found that U.S. military assistance “directed towards reinforcing the national intelligence apparatus and for training the officer corps in counterinsurgency techniques… had significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation.”

A middle class revolution in 1944 against the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, led by students and young army officers, gave rise to free elections that brought to power a reformist government under Juan Jose Arévalo. Arévalo’s government facilitated the development of cooperatives and labor unions; rural workers were given the right to organize, bargain and strike; and a social security system was put in place. His successor, Col. Jacobo Arbenz, built on these reforms and sought to lessen inequality, empower hitherto excluded groups, and encourage national economic development. A centerpiece of his agenda was a program of agrarian reform that called for the expropriation of unused land and its distribution to landless peasants. The expropriation of 234,000 acres of United Fruit Company (UFCO) land (with compensation tied to the company’s tax declaration)—along with Arbenz’s legalization of the Communist Party and inclusion of some of its leaders in the government—precipitated the decision by the Eisenhower administration to overthrow Arbenz.

The CIA armed and trained 170 Guatemalan exiles in Honduras, who invaded Guatemala, supported by CIA-directed radio propaganda and air raids. As part of the effort to overthrow the government, the CIA compiled lists of individuals in Arbenz’s government “to eliminate immediately in event of [a] successful anti-Communist coup.” It also supplied a how-to guidebook in the art of political killing. Arbenz fled the country when the officer corps refused to back him. Col. Castillo Armas seized control of the government and began undoing the reforms of the previous ten years.

In the aftermath of the 1954 coup, hundreds were executed, with the leaders of urban and peasant unions particularly targeted. The registration of 533 unions was cancelled and labor laws were revised to make effective labor organizing impossible. The number of organized workers fell from 100,000 in 1954 to 27,000 in 1955. Less than 0.5 percent of the 100,000 land reform beneficiaries held on to their land by 1956. UFCO got back its quarter million acres and the United States gave $80 million in aid from 1954-1957 to keep the economy afloat.

If the immediate results of the 1954 coup were drastic for the people of Guatemala, the long-term effects were catastrophic. A series of repressive governments closed down political space for democratic organizing. Leaders of social organizations, union organizers and democratic politicians were murdered. Many of those who managed to avoid this fate went into exile or concluded that only armed action could bring about political and social change and joined the guerrilla organizations, which began forming in the early 1960s. The political center was destroyed and the remaining options appeared to be repression, on one side, or revolution, on the other. Succeeding U.S. governments, continuing to view Guatemala through the East-West prism, supported repressive governments with $35 million in military aid from 1967-1976. U.S. Special Forces operated alongside Guatemala’s military during these years when an estimated 50,000 Guatemalans (and twenty-eight U.S. soldiers) were killed.

Despite the intense repression, the situation in Guatemala deteriorated through the 1970s. By the end of the decade,
the guerrillas were a powerful force in rural areas. President Carter's administration distanced the United States from the Guatemalan military. But by this stage the armed forces were in a position to act independently of significant U.S. support in a scorched-earth campaign against suspected supporters of the guerrillas that the UN-sponsored truth commission characterized as “genocide against groups of Mayan people.” At the height of the repression, hundreds of villages were razed; tens of thousands of Guatemalans, mainly Mayan Indians, were murdered; and between half a million and a million people were forced from their homes.17

As Guatemala descended into massive terror, a U.S. official declared, “What we’d give to have an Arbenz now.” At the height of the massacres, which were documented by human rights organizations at the time, the Reagan administration restored sales of military equipment and ended the policy of opposing multilateral development bank loans to Guatemala. President Reagan declared that General Efraín Ríos Montt, who had seized power in a coup in 1982 and presided over the worst of the repression, was getting a “bum rap” and that he was “totally dedicated to democracy in Guatemala.”19

U.S. support for repression in Guatemala continued into the 1990s, as CIA funds flowed to Guatemalan military intelligence despite a freeze on U.S. military aid, and the agency continued to employ a Guatemalan colonel implicated in the murder of a U.S. citizen and in the torture and murder of a guerrilla leader married to an American.20 The war ended with a peace agreement in 1996, but five years of peace have brought very little in the way of justice for the massive human rights violations committed during the years of armed conflict. Following publication in 1999 of the truth commission’s report, President Clinton issued an apology for the U.S. role in Guatemala’s tragedy: “It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake... The United States will no longer take part in campaigns of repression.”21

Following the U.S.-sponsored coup in Guatemala, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations sought to replicate the outcome in Cuba. The Bay of Pigs invasion by CIA-trained Cuban exiles in April 1961 was one of the great debacles of the Cold War period. But CIA attempts to remove Fidel Castro continued—there were eight assassination plots against the Cuban leader, including the use of deadly bacterial powders, under three presidents between 1960 and 1965. A decade later, in Chile, the CIA had another “success story.”

In September 1970, Salvador Allende, the Marxist leader of the Popular Unity Party which was backed by socialists and communists, won a plurality in a three-way contest in which the left, center, and right each won about a third of the votes. Though both houses of the Chilean Congress were in a position to decide the winner in a run-off where no candidate had won an overall majority, by long-standing tradition the candidate with the most votes was elected president. The Nixon administration viewed the accession to power of a Marxist via the ballot box as a nightmare scenario and sought to prevent Allende’s election. The administration developed a two-track strategy: Track 1 sought to reinstate the outgoing president, Eduardo Frei, despite constitutional provisions prohibiting this. A fund of $250,000 to bribe members of the Chilean Congress was established to facilitate this objective.22 Track 2 involved instigating a coup. On 15 September 1970, President Nixon ordered CIA Director Richard Helms to foster a coup. Ten million dollars was to be made available, and Nixon ordered Helms to “make the economy scream,” and have a plan of action in 48 hours.23 According to a CIA cable, “It is firm and continuing policy that...
Allende be overthrown by a coup,” but the “American hand” should be kept hidden.24

The coup plot was foiled when Gen. Rene Schneider, head of the Chilean armed forces, whom the CIA sought to have kidnapped and “neutralized,” was killed by another group of coup plotters with whom the CIA had collaborated. The military and the country then rallied behind Allende, and the Chilean Congress ratified him as president.25

After Allende’s accession to the presidency, U.S. attempts to remove him continued. The CIA spent $8 million to destabilize the elected Chilean government. Overall U.S. pressures on Allende included an economic blockade—shutting off of U.S. aid ($70 million in the late 1960s26), opposition to international credits, discouragement of private investment, and attempts to disrupt the copper market—as well as diplomatic pressure, covert support for opposition parties, and a wide-ranging propaganda campaign to delegitimize Allende and to strengthen public and military opposition to him. As the polarization in Chile increased, intensified by U.S. economic and political pressure, the military under Gen. Pinochet moved into opposition to Allende and on September 11, 1973, he was overthrown in a violent coup.

The U.S. government “greeted Allende’s overthrow with gleeful enthusiasm,” according to an academic analyst. “Kissinger and Nixon were ecstatic,” and U.S. assistance was soon resumed.27 Following the coup, thousands of leftists were detained and tortured, over 3,000 people were killed or “disappeared,” unions were dissolved, universities were taken over, and the country was governed by one of the most repressive regimes in the hemisphere until a plebiscite in 1988, intended to prolong Pinochet’s rule, in fact began the transition back to democracy. The reach of the Pinochet regime’s repression extended to Washington, D.C., with the car-bombing assassination in September 1976 of former Chilean foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, and his colleague Ronni Moffitt by the Chilean secret police—a terrorist crime for which family members are still seeking justice.

The United States collaborated with the Chilean regime after the coup, even providing information on a Chilean leftist leader who was detained in Panama and handed over to Chilean secret police, and then “disappeared.” The individual, Jorge Isaac Fuentes, was detained as part of Operation Condor, “a network of Chilean, Argentinian, and Paraguayan secret police agencies which coordinated tracking, capturing and killing opponents.”28 President Carter’s administration distanced the United States from the Pinochet regime, but under President Reagan close relations resumed. The Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Langhorne Motley, said in 1985: “The democracies of the western world have a debt of gratitude to the people and government of Chile for what they did in 1973... the destiny of Chile is in good hands, Chilean hands.”29
The United States continued to fund Somoza almost until the end—providing $14 million in military aid to the Nicaraguan National Guard from 1975 to 1978 and supporting Somoza’s request for a $66 million loan from the International Monetary Fund two months before his fall.30 In the months before Somoza’s defeat, the Carter administration sought a moderate solution that would get rid of Somoza but keep the regime (and the National Guard) in place, and tried unsuccessfully to get an Organization of American States (OAS) force to intervene. But over the decades since the United States had helped Somoza’s father to power, the regime had destroyed any viable democratic opposition, and U.S. attempts to concoct a last-minute alternative to Somoza and the Sandinistas failed completely. For a year and a half following the Sandinista victory in July 1979, the Carter administration maintained links to the Nicaraguan government while using economic and political pressure to moderate the FSLN’s leftist policies.

**U.S. support for the Somoza regime in Nicaragua:**

In the early 20th Century, U.S. forces had occupied Nicaragua for a quarter-century till they formed a National Guard that could take over the maintenance of law and order in the early 1930s. From the 1930s through the 1970s, U.S. presidents worked closely with the Somoza dynasty, which controlled the National Guard. The Somozas bled the country dry, ruling with an iron fist and preventing the development of any authentic democratic opposition. The lack of democratic space helped fuel the growth of an armed guerrilla movement, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which carried out some dramatic actions against the Somoza regime and waged a low-level armed struggle until the mid-1970s. The corruption and venality of Anastasio Somoza, son of the founder of the dynasty, and his cohorts helped build a broad opposition to the dictatorship, while Somoza’s repression of democratic opposition made the Sandinistas’ armed struggle appear an increasingly legitimate and viable alternative. The public outcry in response to the murder in 1978 of a key democratic opponent of the regime, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, and effective political and military strategies of the FSLN brought Nicaragua to a point of revolutionary upheaval in 1978-79.

**Historic U.S. involvement in El Salvador:**

From the beginning of the 20th Century the United States was much less directly involved in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, Honduras, or Guatemala. U.S. forces did not occupy the country in the early part of the century, nor were U.S. companies as prominent in the nation’s economy as they were in Honduras and Guatemala. But successive administrations worked closely with the mainly military governments in El Salvador after the massacre of 1932 in which as many as 30,000 peasants were murdered following an abortive leftist uprising.

The development of a revolutionary situation in El Salvador in the late 1970s followed a similar pattern to revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua and attempted revolutions elsewhere in the region. Great inequalities between a small landowning elite and the mass of peasants and poor urban dwellers, whose economic situation deteriorated in spite of a period of growth in the 1960s, provided the conditions for the development of social movements pressing for economic reforms. The closing down of political space by governments and their military backers and intense repression against democratic reformers and union, student and community leaders...
limited significantly the potential for staving off revolution by reforming the system. The growth of “popular organizing” in the late 1960s and the 1970s—with a key role played by base communities organized by Catholic priests, nuns, and lay leaders—and the development of guerrilla organizations from 1970 posed increasing challenges to the government. As the challenges—both political and armed—increased, the Salvadoran government responded with increased repression—targeted death squad killings and the first massacres. The repression did not defeat the opposition, but pushed more opponents in the direction of the revolutionary forces while undermining the regime’s credibility internationally. By late 1979, spurred by the FSLN victory in Nicaragua, the Salvadoran rebels of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) looked close to achieving a successful revolution.

Without essential U.S. support, it is unlikely that Salvadoran military and paramilitary forces could have become such an efficient killing machine. In his in-depth study of the U.S. role in the violence that engulfed El Salvador, Michael McClintock states that in 1960, following the Cuban revolution (and a decade before any of the Salvadoran guerrilla groups would form), the United States embarked on an intensive program of training Salvadoran military and police forces in counterinsurgency. U.S. advisers, working through the CIA office, built the Salvadoran “intelligence apparatus practically from scratch.” The Salvadoran intelligence service, known in the late 1970s as the Salvadoran National Security Agency (ANSESAL), was the “nerve center of the combined intelligence networks of the security system.”

According to McClintock, the centralized intelligence network—reporting directly to the president—gathered information from the security forces and from a “vast network of paramilitary irregulars feeding information into the intelligence apparatus [and] providing manpower for counterinsurgency’s dirty work.” U.S. agencies helped develop this paramilitary network, the Democratic Nationalist Organization (ORDEN), and trained personnel of the Treasury Police, National Police, and National Guard. These forces would play a central role in the death squad killings of the late 1970s and the 1980s. The intelligence network ANSESAL was tied into the Central America telecommunications networks operated from the U.S. military’s Southern Command in the Panama Canal Zone. The deputy head of ANSESAL in the late 1970s was Roberto d’Aubuisson, who attended the Public Safety Program’s International Peace Academy in Washington, DC. He would become the most notorious death squad leader in El Salvador in the late 1970s and 1980s. Following the October 1979 coup against General Romero by military reformers, ANSESAL and ORDEN were abolished, but, states McClintock, military hardliners “re-established and expanded much of the old intelligence system into a grass-roots intelligence network that fed names of suspected subversives to military and paramilitary death squads.”

After the Sandinista victory in July 1979, with El Salvador appearing close to revolution, the Carter administration sought a centrist solution that would lead to a liberalization of the Salvadoran regime and keep the revolutionaries from taking power. The United States encouraged a coup in October 1979 by military reformers who brought democratic civilian politicians into a five-man junta. Massive repression by military forces and paramilitary death squads closely linked to the armed forces prevented any possibility of a centrist solution. During the final year of the Carter presidency, repression intensified and the stage was set in El Salvador for civil war.

**The Reagan administration and Central America:**

From the outset, the Reagan administration sought the defeat of the leftist rebels in El Salvador and the overthrow of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

**El Salvador:**

Military and economic aid to El Salvador increased dramatically from $64 million in 1980 to over a half billion a year by the late 1980s. Congressional critics of human rights violations by the Salvadoran military forced the administration to certify on a bi-annual basis that the government was making improvements in human rights, that economic reforms were continuing, and that the government was gaining con-
The United States began training rapid reaction battalions and in 1981, the first such battalion trained, the Atlacatl, carried out the worst massacre of the war in the village of El Mozote, killing 926 villagers, “mostly children, women and old people.” U.S. advisers played a major role in developing the strategies of the Salvadoran armed forces and in 1984 the Salvadoran military launched a massive bombing campaign against rebel-dominated areas. According to Americas Watch:

_Thousands of noncombatants are being killed in indiscriminate attacks by bombardment from the air, shelling, and ground sweeps… the armed forces of El Salvador, ground and air, are engaged in indiscriminate attacks upon the civilian population in conflict zones—particularly in guerrilla controlled zones—of El Salvador._

Massive U.S. assistance helped prevent a leftist victory in El Salvador and by the end of President Reagan's first term, prospects looked brighter for the administration with an elected Christian Democratic Party president, José Napoleon Duarte, who was highly regarded in the U.S. Congress.

**Nicaragua:**

From the first year of President Reagan's first term, the president and his administration were determined to overthrow the government of Nicaragua and were willing to pay almost any price to achieve that goal. The administration's determination to oust the Sandinista regime made policy toward Nicaragua and aid to the contras the most contentious issue in relations between the executive and legislative branches and within Congress since Vietnam and later culminated in a major presidential scandal, the Iran-contra affair. From late 1981 the administration began an economic, political and military campaign against the Sandinista government and launched a covert war against Nicaragua. The CIA gave financial and logistical support to train Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries, or contras, many of whose leaders were former members of Somoza's National Guard. Trained initially by the Argentinian military, the contras grew from a few hundred to 15,000 troops by 1985._ The CIA produced a manual on psychological warfare—called a “murder manual” by the Washington Post—that gave advice on “neutralizing” public officials, provoking violence at demonstrations, and creating “martyrs for the cause.”_ The agency launched a campaign of sabotage in which CIA contract agents, termed “Latino assets,” sabotaged ports, bridges and oil refineries while making it appear the work of the contras, and U.S. Special Forces blew up oil storage tanks at Corinto. In January 1984, the CIA mined three Nicaraguan harbors. Several European and Latin American ships and a Soviet oil tanker were damaged; and two Nicaraguans were killed when their fishing boats hit mines. The mining caused a firestorm of protest. The Soviets protested to the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, but officials denied any U.S. role in the mining. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called it “an act violating international law… an act of war. I don't see how we're going to explain it.” _The New York Times_ called the mining, “illegal, deceptive and dumb,” and the _Miami Herald_ termed it “unacceptable terrorism.” Nicaragua brought action against the United States in the International Court of Justice at The Hague. The Reagan administration refused to accept the court's jurisdiction. The court ruled unanimously that the mining and blockade of Nicaragua's harbors should cease and by 14-1 (the U.S. judge on the court dissenting) ordered the United States to end any military and paramilitary activities against Nicaragua that violated international law.
To win congressional funding for the *contras*, President Reagan appealed to the American people to support the “freedom fighters” who were “the moral equivalent of our founding fathers.” Human rights organizations at the time painted a very different picture: Americas Watch found that the main *contra* group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), “made deliberate use of terrorist tactics” and “engaged repeatedly in kidnappings, torture and murder of unarmed civilians.” A former *contra* leader, Edgar Chamorro, said it was “premeditated policy to terrorize noncombatants to prevent them from cooperating with the government.” The *contras* commonly targeted farmers working in cooperatives, community and union leaders, and anyone bringing government services to the countryside, such as agricultural extension workers and teachers.

When Congress placed tight restrictions on the use of U.S. aid and later cut off assistance, the Reagan administration found ways of keeping the *contras* viable until aid could be restored. Administration officials sought private donations in the United States and substantial assistance from other countries—some $45 million from 1984-1985—in breach of U.S. law. The administration also launched a secret scheme to trade arms for hostages in Iran and siphon off profits for the *contras*. When this became public, it caused the most serious crisis of the Reagan presidency. A congressional inquiry into the Iran-contra scandal condemned the administration for “secrecy, deception, and disdain for the rule of law” and said it had “undermined a cardinal principle of the Constitution” and set the nation “on a path to dictatorship.” While the struggle over contra aid continued, the scandal essentially undermined the administration’s policies in Nicaragua and opened space for the Contadora peace process, led by Latin American nations. A peace agreement was signed to end the conflict and elections were held in Nicaragua in February 1990. To the surprise of many observers, a coalition headed by Violeta Chamorro defeated the incumbent president, Daniel Ortega of the FSLN.

Conservatives claimed Chamorro’s victory was a vindication of U.S. policies during the 1980s. Liberal opponents pointed to the massive political and human costs of those policies and argued that a similar outcome could have been achieved through political and diplomatic means.

**El Salvador:**

During President Reagan’s second term, the leverage provided by high levels of military and economic aid to El Salvador helped to limit some of the more egregious human rights violations of the early war years and maintained a sense of progress toward eliminating the guerrilla threat. But when the rebels launched a major offensive in San Salvador in November 1989, they demonstrated they were far from a spent force and could likely keep the war going for years. The murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter by elite U.S.-trained forces of the Atlacatl Battalion raised major questions in Congress and for the American public about whether U.S. aid was contributing to improved human rights in El Salvador. The FMLN offensive and the Jesuit murders were important factors in helping create the conditions for negotiations that led to a peace agreement in January 1992.

There will continue to be debate over the extent to which U.S. policies contributed to achieving policy objectives in Central America and whether those ends justified the price paid to achieve them. The costs of the wars in Central America, in which the United States was a leading player, were extremely high by any standards. In El Salvador, 70,000 were killed, the vast majority by the armed forces and military-controlled death squads. There were over a million refugees. The United States sent $6 billion in aid during the eleven-year war. In Nicaragua, 30,000 were killed, 100,000 became refugees, and the economy was destroyed. Honduras was destabilized by the *contra* war waged from its territory; the military was strengthened at the expense of civilian institutions; human rights violations increased; and the CIA helped train a special investigations unit that grew into a special military intelligence unit, Battalion 316, that engaged in torture and killing of dissidents. Between 1980 and 1984 there were 247 unsolved killings and disappearances in Honduras. In Guatemala, 200,000 were killed, most in the period from the late 1970s to early 1980s. There were 626 massacres, half a million to a million refugees, and acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people.
(iv) Conclusions

By the beginning of the Cold War, the United States had worked for more than a century with traditional economic and military elites who had little interest in the social and economic betterment of their people, or in democracy and human rights. It was perhaps a natural tendency, but nonetheless a fundamental error, to continue to side with such regimes as long as they professed strong anti-communist views. Those regimes came to be seen as a bulwark in the fight against Communism, and the enemies of those regimes were viewed as a threat to U.S. interests. The old adage, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” came to define U.S. policy in Latin America. Successive U.S. administrations supported or turned a blind eye to repression, corruption, and lack of democracy and were identified with despotic regimes by the opponents of these governments and observers. Continued repression by these regimes and the lack of space allowed for political change identified the regimes and their U.S. backers with reaction and repression and identified the international opponents of these regimes—including the Soviet Union and its allies—with the quest for justice and social change.

Some conservative supporters of U.S. policies in Latin America during the Cold War might say: ‘We won the Cold War. Latin America was an important—but not decisive—battleground in the struggle. We contained Soviet advances there, rolled back Communism in Nicaragua, Grenada, and Chile, held it off in El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, and other countries. Mistakes were made. There was substantial collateral damage. But that was a price that had to be paid to guarantee the overall victory over Communism.’

History cannot be re-run to demonstrate the impact of a fundamentally different policy. Differences of opinion will persist. What can be said is that U.S. policies had a substantial cost. They identified this country with dictatorship and repression, with corrupt regimes and massive human rights violations. Training military and police forces that would carry out massacres and death squad killings and organizing the intelligence services that would coordinate this violence contributed to enormous suffering: hundreds of thousands of lives were lost; people lived for decades under despotic regimes, with an unquantifiable human cost in freedom denied to hundreds of millions of people. For a country identified from it’s founding with freedom, democracy and individual rights, and engaged in a worldwide struggle against a system that denied these values, this is a weighty burden. U.S. support for democracy and human rights would not have forestalled turmoil and change in Latin America—since there were more than enough internal factors arising out of the region’s own history to ensure a rocky path to democracy and development. But the United States would have been identified with democracy and freedom, and the human costs for the people of Latin America would likely have been very different.

Though the focus of this study has been on U.S. policies in Latin America, the problems identified here were endemic to the global approach taken in the war against Communism rather than being specific to Latin America. In Africa, for example, the United States supported dictators, such as Samuel Doe in Liberia, Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, Mohammed Siad Barre in Somalia, and Jaafar Nimeiry in Sudan, and was willing to turn a blind eye to human rights violations, corruption, and the lack of democracy, so long as the regime remained an ally in the struggle against Communism.

Today, in the struggle against terrorism, the United States confronts a determined and ubiquitous opponent. To defeat this adversary is seen to require getting as much support as possible from nations that can contribute military bases, intelligence, funding, armed forces, or political support. There are substantial risks that the United States will repeat the mistakes of the Cold War period—turning a blind eye to lack of democracy, repression and human rights violations by new or existing allies in the “war on terrorism.” It is important, therefore, to point to some of the lessons from the Cold War in Latin America so that mistakes that may have huge costs might be avoided.
3. Lessons from Latin America for the post-September 11th World

1. WE WILL BE KNOWN BY THE COMPANY WE KEEP: Political alliances have a long-term impact, both on the “ally” society itself and on other nations. Because of its historic relationships with dictators and unsavory movements, many Latin Americans still view the United States as unconcerned about repression or rights violations if it is in the immediate U.S. interest. In the current efforts to combat terrorism, the United States must look very closely at the governments and movements with which it is forming alliances, or risk being implicated in their misdeeds. People keep asking why the United States is hated abroad. Part of the answer lies in the company it has kept.

2. DON’T TURN A BLIND EYE TO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: Democracy and human rights are crucial in the struggle against terrorism and must not be treated as a nuisance or an afterthought. Nor should democracy and human rights be traded off against intelligence support or military bases in the struggle to combat terrorism. The United States must press allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and other governments cooperating in the fight against terrorism, to move toward greater democracy and full respect for the human rights of their people. These values must be supported because they are right and in America’s interest.

3. ABSOLUTE POWER CORRUPTS: Every administration wants unquestioned power at a time of crisis. The Central America experience of the 1980s—where intelligence agencies were given wide rein to conduct covert activities and mined harbors and recruited unsavory allies—demonstrates the critical role that congressional and public oversight play in moderating excesses. Close oversight by Congress of intelligence activities and on respect paid to human rights by U.S. allies will be crucial in the period ahead. Timely and reliable information on U.S. policies and actions must be made available—the maximum commensurate with protecting lives and vital interests—so that the American people can make informed choices about government policies and whether they advance U.S. interests and values.

4. KEEP CLOSE TABS ON THE CIA: In the aftermath of September 11, there have been calls to ‘unleash’ the CIA—steps have already been taken to weaken restrictions on CIA operatives working with known human rights violators, and the administration is discussing allowing agents to engage in selective assassinations. An argument is made today that information can only be gained in the struggle against terrorism by working with people who have ‘dirty hands’. But as a former CIA inspector general has argued, the CIA’s problems in infiltrating terrorist cells arise more from lack of language and culture skills than from human rights limitations, and that “oversight is necessary lest we work our way, in the dark of night, back to the situation of agency abuses” that led to congressional investigations in the 1970s. While the United States must improve intelligence on terrorist networks, major dangers in working with torturers and killers and becoming implicated in their crimes must be acknowledged and weighed. Limitations on working with known rights violators are justified, and strong
oversight mechanisms, both within the CIA and other intelligence agencies and by Congress, are essential to ensure that the United States does not become complicit in the crimes of its assets.

5. **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND: WEAPONS AND TRAINING SKILLS HAVE A LONG SHELF LIFE.** Whether or not U.S. military trainers taught abusive techniques to repressive Latin American armies, those trained became more efficient killers of innocent people, as with the Atlacatl Battalion in El Salvador. Training and weapons are often provided for a specific purpose—during the Cold War to fight communism, today to fight terrorism. However, once skills and equipment are acquired, they can be used for other purposes. The Mujahadeen in Afghanistan was trained by the United States to fight the Soviet Union, but ended up fighting the United States. Central America is still awash in small arms, provided by the United States and the Soviet Union during the war years, which are now used to commit common crime. A more long-term perspective needs to guide training and weapons transfers, and Congress should monitor these activities closely.

6. **DOMESTIC DISSENT IS NOT THE ENEMY:** President Bush has told other nations that ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,’ and levels of public and congressional support for the president and his policies are currently very high. It is important, however, that in the fervor to combat terrorism, those who believe war is not the appropriate response to the attacks of September 11 or who speak out in favor of civil liberties and human rights considerations not be seen as part of the “enemy” to be defeated. There is a precedent in the Cold War struggle in Latin America when the Reagan administration, believing it was not winning the public relations battle on U.S. aid to the *contras* and to the Salvadoran government, used the FBI to target opponents of administration policy, including union activists, members of religious groups, and grassroots organizers. There are reports that the Attorney General and the head of the FBI favor scrapping the limitations on surveillance of religious and political groups in the United States—a step that would be a grave error, opening the door once again to political investigations of domestic opponents of government policy.52

7. **DON’T BE ‘PENNY WISE, POUND FOOLISH’ WITH PEACE:** While in Central America the United States provided respectable levels of support for implementation of peace processes following the wars of the 1980s, in Afghanistan the consequences of the failure to support peace after the Soviet Union left are being reaped today. Aid programs that support institutional change can mean the difference between securing peace in a post-war environment and leaving disillusioned people ready for the next conflict.

8. **INVESTING IN PEOPLE HELPS CUT TERROR AT THE ROOTS:** While law enforcement action against terrorists is essential, the most sustainable way to combat broader support for terrorist activities is to address the conditions that help foster it—poverty, lack of social and economic development, and undemocratic and repressive regimes that leave their citizens scant hope of bettering their lives, and hence open space for those offering extreme alternatives. Today, increasing U.S. investment in democracy and development is crucial to address the conditions that provide fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. A substantial increase in development assistance is warranted. Investing in the development of democratic institutions, in education, health, and the empowerment of women—currently development priorities, but grossly underfunded—would be a major contribution in the struggle against terrorism. ■
4. Footnotes

4 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 38.
5 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 62.
7 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 152.
8 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 152; and School of the Americas Watch website: “Among the SOA’s nearly 60,000 graduates are notorious dictators Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos of Panama, Leopoldo Galtieri and Roberto Viola of Argentina, Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru, Guillermo Rodriguez of Ecuador, and Hugo Banzer Suarez of Bolivia.” Internet, URL: http://www.soaw.org/
9 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 5.
12 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 125.
14 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 125.
15 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 258 and 170.
16 Guatemala: Memory of Silence, (Conclusions and recommendations), p. 41.
18 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 261.
22 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 172.
26 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 174.
27 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 176.
29 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 176.
30 LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, p. 233 and 237.
33 Mcclintock, The American Connection, p. 204.
35 Mcclintock, The American Connection, p. 221.
38 In Contempt of Congress, p.99.
39 Smith, Talons of the Eagle, p. 184.
41 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p. 331.
42 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, pp.334 and 337.
43 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.539.
45 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.413.
46 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.393.
47 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.504.
48 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.500.
49 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, p.299.