

# Latin America and the Cold War: Background Essay

[Home](#)[Background Essay](#)[Kennan Memorandum](#)[Photograph of Che Guevara](#)[Revolutionary Song](#)[Further Resources](#)

## Background Essay

### Latin America During the Cold War

by Allen Wells

The Cold War (1947-1989) altered Latin America's relationship to the United States profoundly, as the region became a battleground between two competing ideological systems—capitalism and communism. Prior to the Cold War, both economic and geopolitical concerns had motivated U.S. policy toward Latin America. But, after the lowering of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, George Kennan, the chief architect of American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union, advocated containment to halt the spread of communism, not just in Europe, but globally. The result was a bipolar world featuring proxy wars fought throughout the Third World by surrogates and clients of the two superpowers. Latin American nations, historically considered to be part of "our backyard," were not permitted to remain neutral as Washington expected Latin America to ally with the United States while the Soviet Union sought to gain access to what had been an American sphere of influence.

#### U.S. Aspirations

The U.S. sought to secure its "backyard" by signing a mutual defense treaty, the Rio Pact, in 1947, and by establishing the Organization of American States a year later. In one sense these regional agreements were an extension of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) that had warned Europeans against retaking their former colonies, but in the Cold War context, these partnerships gave the U.S. the opportunity to strengthen Latin American states militarily against communist penetration.

While the U.S. publicly emphasized its support for democracy and civilian rule, successive Democratic and Republican administrations quietly worked behind the scenes to sustain brutal, anticommunist dictatorships or endorsed them outright. Washington's Cold Warriors considered progressive political parties advocating

## Multimedia

Several key events from 1959-1962 framed the U.S.-Cuba relationship during the Cold War. These primary source videos highlight three of those key events.

### **January 5, 1959**

Castro and Rebel Forces in Havana

### **January 5, 1961**

U.S. Breaks off Diplomatic Relations with Cuba

### **October 22, 1962**

Cuban Missile Crisis Address to the Nation, President John F. Kennedy

social or economic reform untrustworthy or too weak to overcome leftist opposition. As Kennan put it: "...it is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal one if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists." Or as Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated: "Do nothing to offend the dictators...they are the only people we can depend on."

Washington's support for such repressive rulers as Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, the Somoza family in Nicaragua, and Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic alienated many Latin Americans who were offended by the apparent hypocrisy of the U.S.'s advocacy of democracy and its support for right-wing dictatorships. Moreover, some intellectuals, workers, and peasants, who were frustrated with their own nations' glaring inequalities, found hope in Marxist ideology that advocated social equality and class struggle.

When Washington deemed Latin American democracies in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, or Chile too radical, the United States intervened militarily or encouraged their countries' respective armed forces to stage a coup. With peaceful roads to reform forestalled, Latin American rebels felt they had little choice but to opt for armed struggle.

Fidel Castro's defeat of Batista in Cuba in 1959 was the defining moment for U.S. policy in Latin America during the Cold War. Castro's Revolution pursued radical social and economic policies, while at the same time it alienated the U.S. by nationalizing American companies and signing military and economic pacts with Moscow. By December 1961, Castro had proclaimed that he was a Marxist-Leninist, diplomatic relations were broken off between Havana and Washington, and the Kennedy administration had slapped a trade embargo on the island. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations took added steps to destabilize the Cuban Revolution, including a number of failed attempts to assassinate the Cuban comandante, and sought to isolate the island nation from its peers in Latin America.

The disastrous failure of the CIA-led force of anti-Castro rebels at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 represented a major propaganda victory for the Cuban Revolution. It also convinced Castro that this small expeditionary force was nothing more than a prelude to a full scale U.S. military invasion of the island. At Castro's request, Nikita Khrushchev agreed to install medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. When U.S. reconnaissance flights detected the arms buildup, the two superpowers (with little apparent input from Cuba) came to the brink of a nuclear confrontation. The crisis was resolved by removing the missiles in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade the island (thereby ensuring the survival of the Revolution) and to remove American missiles in Turkey. Even so, the U.S. continued to destabilize Cuba while Castro sought to spread the example of the Revolution by aiding and assisting guerrilla insurgencies throughout Latin America.

U.S. policy in Latin America after 1959 can be boiled down to three potent words: "no more Cubas." To achieve this goal, Washington pursued a two-track approach: foreign assistance to encourage modernization and economic development, and the training and arming of Latin American militaries supportive of U.S. objectives. After a decade of minimal economic aid to Latin America, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, in collaboration with U.S. multinational companies, pumped in twenty billion dollars of economic assistance. The Alliance for Progress did contribute to per capita economic growth for most nations during the 1960s, but meaningful social and agrarian reforms proved elusive.

### **Latin America's Response**

How did Latin Americans respond to the Cold War? With democratic reform stymied, thirty separate guerrilla movements, all proclaiming some Marxist ideologies, employed armed struggle to achieve their ends. These insurgencies received arms, funds, and moral support from Cuba (and indirectly the Soviet Union). Initially, a number of these insurgencies adopted a model promoted by Cuba where a small, committed group would create revolutionary cells in the countryside to win the hearts and minds of Latin America's peasantries. Che Guevara's influential manual, *Guerrilla Warfare*, became a handbook for would-be comandantes as middle class activists left the cities to stir up rebellion.

That first wave of uprisings proved unsuccessful, however, and came to an abrupt end with Che's death in Bolivia in 1967, where he was attempting to export his revolutionary model and replicate his earlier success in Cuba. Che's death, however, proved to be a powerful example to young, idealistic revolutionaries who praised his determination to give his life to that end. Ultimately, the human and material costs of these unsuccessful guerrilla movements would prove very high.

A second wave of guerrilla insurgency followed in the 1970s and 1980s and stressed that each revolution was organic and had to grow out of the social, economic and political conditions of that country. The second wave produced one notable success: Nicaragua. In 1979 the Sandinistas drove out the Somoza dynasty, which had ruled that tiny Central American nation for forty-five years. But the Sandinistas' success would prove short-lived thanks to domestic and foreign opposition. Just as they had done to Cuba, the U.S. played a key role in funding, arming and mobilizing opposition and in 1990 the revolution came to an end when the Sandinistas were defeated at the polls.

Elsewhere guerrilla insurgencies were beaten back by an anticommunist crusade that drew support from the region's upper- and middle-classes, the military establishment, and the U.S. government. Civil wars turned into dirty wars in places like El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil, as military

dictatorships sought to remove "the Marxist cancer" from their countries. In this, they were ruthlessly successful. More than 30,000 were "disappeared" in Argentina's infamous Dirty War, while 75,000 lives were lost in El Salvador's decade-long civil war. In each case, the large number of deaths has been attributed to repressive military regimes that prosecuted these wars against their own citizens.

### Conclusion

By the end of the Cold War, Cuba was the lone holdout in the "backyard," although it remained economically and diplomatically isolated, and now without material support from Moscow. Latin America, which had been such a flashpoint during the Cold War, fell off the geopolitical map. No longer of strategic value, Latin America was left to rebuild its shattered countries with little or no assistance from either of the two superpowers.

### About the Author

Allen Wells is the Roger Howell, Jr. Professor of History at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. His scholarship has focused on modern Mexican history, especially Yucatán and he offers a range of courses in colonial and modern Latin American history. Originally from New York, he received his M.A (1974) and Ph.D. (1979) in History at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and his B.A. (1973) in History and Latin American Studies from the State University of New York at Binghamton. Recent publications include *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR and the Jews of Sosúa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) and "Reports of its Demise are not Exaggerated: The Life and Times of Yucatecan Henequen," in *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500-2000*, eds. Carlos Marichal, Zephyr Frank and Steven Topik. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.)