

"Liberalism and Big Sticks: The Politics of U.S. Interventions in Latin America, 1898-2004"

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I

Linda Kerber once observed, "Historians who inquire into the consequences of power seldom come up cheerful."¹ I will endeavor in this paper to prove her wrong, but the effort to do so may be painful to watch.

In the western hemisphere, the consequences of the power exerted by the government of the United States have been plainly visible for more than a century. The United States made itself the dominant power, first in the Caribbean Basin and then, after World War One, throughout most of South America. The reality of this dominance, and the avid pursuit of it by US administrations as different as those of McKinley and Wilson, no longer occasion much debate. Nor does the logic that seems to have driven it. "For nearly two centuries," Lars Schoultz concluded in his recent survey, "three interests have determined the content of United States policy toward Latin America: the need to protect U.S. security, the desire to accommodate the demands of U.S. domestic politics, and the drive to promote U.S. economic development."²

¹ In "Portraying an 'Unexceptional' American History," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 5, 2002), p. B14.

² Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 367.

Unfortunately, the security of the United States, the political interests of its elected officials, and the health of its economy (or any of its large corporations) cannot be pursued simultaneously in anything like a coherent manner. Since the United States has not had to confront sustained competition from other Great Powers in the region for more than a century, it has not experienced much difficulty in maintaining its dominant position despite notable policy failures. This combination of incoherence and low risk helps to explain why U.S. policy has so often seemed inexplicably erratic or senselessly destructive. In effect, the Big Stick has been wielded in a way that resembles what the late nineteenth-century Mexican philosopher and educator Justo Sierra once called “that ‘marvelous collective animal’ whose “enormous intestine” has insufficient nourishment”³ -- a great untamed beast with few natural enemies near enough to constrain it.

Realists, as certain scholars and practitioners of international relations have styled themselves, would find nothing surprising in this story. Superpowers tend to dominate their smaller neighbors, who have little choice but to join the bandwagon and hope for the best. Relative might drives the system. Historians need not waste their time in the archives looking up what U.S. officials said to explain their actions. Structure trumps ethnography – all the rest is noise. Ideology, including Liberalism, is just part of the noise.

This paper will look at one significant dimension of U.S. relations with Latin America in the twentieth century, that is, the history of successful efforts by the government of the United States to secure the overthrow, almost always by violent

³ Cited in Charles Hale, *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 33.

means, of Latin American governments that displeased it. The paper will argue that neither security nor economic interest helps much to explain either why the United States government was displeased or why it took its displeasure to such lengths. That leaves politics, where the waters are inevitably muddled by the interaction of rhetoric, culture, and mass psychology. Smart politics for the politician does not necessarily lead to rational choices for the body politic. Since it does not appear possible to explain US intervention in Latin America by means of conventional social scientific analysis, this paper leaves causal speculation to experts in cultural studies, the psychology of decision-making, and the contingencies of political calculation.

We begin with some data on the dependent variable.

II

Between 1898 and 1994, the U.S. government managed to secure the overthrow of 41 governments among our sister republics in Latin America, an average of one successful intervention every 28 months for an entire century (see Table 1). Direct intervention involving the use of U.S. military forces, intelligence agents, or local citizens employed by U.S. government agencies occurred in 17 of the 41 cases. In another 24 cases, the U.S. government intervention was indirect. That is, local actors (usually military leaders) played the principal roles, but either would not have acted or would not have succeeded without encouragement or help from the U.S. government and its agents.

While direct interventions are easily identified and copiously documented, identifying indirect interventions requires an exercise in historical judgment. The list of 41 includes only cases where in my judgment the incumbent government would likely

have survived in the absence of U.S. hostility. The list ranges from obvious cases to close calls. An example of an obvious case is the decision, made in the Oval Office in January 1963, to incite the Guatemalan army to overthrow the (dubiously) elected government of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes in order to prevent an open competitive election that might have been won by former President Juan José Arévalo.⁴ A somewhat less obvious case is that of the Chilean military coup against the government of President Salvador Allende Gossens on September 11, 1973. The Allende government had plenty of domestic opponents eager to see it deposed. It is included in this list because absent the unremitting hostility of the U.S. government, the Allende administration would almost certainly have managed to continue in office until the next presidential elections.⁵

The 41 cases do not include incidents in which the United States sought to depose a Latin American government, but failed in the attempt. The most famous such case was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961.⁶ Also absent from the list are numerous cases in which the U.S. government acted decisively to forestall a coup d'état, as in December 1965, when the U.S. ambassador in Guatemala was instructed to “convey a strong warning against a coup” to the leader of a group plotting a coup

⁴ The coup led by Defense Minister Colonel Enrique Peralta took place on March 31, 1963. Arévalo, who had entered the country only days before, managed to flee back across the border. The *Miami Herald* published an interesting account of the Oval Office decision to overthrow Ydígoras written by Georgie Anne Geyer on December 24, 1966, pp. 12-A.

⁵ The best account is in Peter Kornbluh's introduction to the documents published in *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability: A National Security Archive Book* (New York: The New Press, 2003),

⁶ See James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Politics of Illusion: the Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

against the military regime that had seized power two years earlier at Washington's request.⁷

The most difficult to judge are the cases like the 1966 military coup in Argentina, In this case, U.S. officials were opposed to the coup eventually led by Lieutenant General Juan Carlos Onganía, but refrained from communicating U.S. opposition to the plotters on the advice of U.S. Ambassador Edwin M. Martin, who observed that "the military have convinced themselves that in removing the Illia government they would be fulfilling basically [the] identical role in Argentina that [the] armed forces performed in Brazil in ousting Goulart... They have followed closely US aid to Brazil since Goulart['s] departure and [the] press here has publicized, perhaps excessively, [the] enthusiasm of US investors for [the] new regime in Brazil."⁸ The reaction of the U.S. government to the coup on June 28 took roughly the shape that the military expected. Recognition was extended on July 14 and both economic and military aid resumed shortly thereafter. I have excluded such cases from the list of 41, even though they demonstrate clearly how the U.S. embrace of one military regime (in Brazil in 1964) led military officials in other countries discount U.S. opposition to their plotting as merely "pro forma," a view that was almost always accurate.

The list in Table 1 also excludes cases in which the U.S. government managed to play a decisive role in overturning a government by means of "majestic inactivity" in the

⁷ See the account in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-68*, vol. 31, *South and Central America; Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2004), pp. 201-05 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*, followed by date). The U.S. knew the name of the coup plotter and the date he intended to move (December 20, 1965, postponed to December 22, and then abandoned). The instructions to the U.S. ambassador to head it off were sent on December 17. Instructions were also sent to the U.S. ambassador in Nicaragua, who cautioned President Anastasio Somoza against giving further encouragement to the plotters in Guatemala. He was also asked to stop his efforts to foment a coup in Costa Rica as well.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

face of predictable outcomes. This exclusion is due to the multiple difficulties that attend the specification of appropriate counterfactuals. Suppose, for example, that the U.S. ambassador in Guatemala had not been instructed on December 17, 1965 to convey the strong disapproval of his government to the officers plotting a coup against the military dictator the U.S. had encouraged to take power only 18 months earlier? U.S. inactivity might then have proved decisive in the securing the collapse of the Peralta government. Would we be justified in including such cases in our list, absent any evidence of overt hostility toward the incumbent government?

Many cases are even murkier, as the past decade of Latin American coups, near coups, sanitized coups, and failed coups shows. Except for the ouster of President Aristide in Haiti in 2004, the United States has not given an explicit green light for a coup d'état in Latin America since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. But the United States *has* failed to provide modest amounts of aid in timely fashion (Ecuador, Bolivia), provided overt and covert aid to opposition groups seeking the ouster of an elected incumbent (Venezuela), and helped unconstitutional regimes to make themselves respectable (Ecuador and, briefly, Venezuela). Sometimes, that is, the red lights shine so feebly that green lights are not needed. The lesson for statesmen and historians is the same: informal empires rely on political markets rather than administrative codes. Searching for responsible officials and unambiguous signals is often unproductive.

Finally, our list excludes cases in which the U.S. government played a decisive role in overthrowing a government and actually managed to conceal its role. The number of such cases is probably small, though in the era before widespread leaking in Washington, i.e., prior to the Nixon era, there may yet be untold secrets.

The list of 41 interventions in Table 1 is thus fairly conservative. Overthrowing governments in Latin America has never been exactly routine business for the United States, but the option to depose a sitting government has appeared on the desk of U.S. presidents with remarkable frequency over the past century.

III

Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. officials cited U.S. security interests either as determinative or as a principal motivation for nearly every intervention.⁹ Even in cases where U.S. officials did not acknowledge the U.S. role in the overthrow of a Latin American government until much later, they generally remarked on how much more friendly or reliable the new regime would be. In the numerous pre-World War One interventions in the Caribbean, especially the prolonged occupations of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua, U.S. officials suggested they were worried at the prospect that a potentially (but not then actually) hostile power like Germany might secure coaling stations and other facilities that its fleet could then use as bases for attacking the United States. In the aftermath of World War Two, U.S. officials usually cited the potential security threat posed by Soviet “penetration” of the western hemisphere to justify interventions in the region.

With hindsight, it is now possible to dismiss virtually all these claims as implausible on their face. Some of the alleged threats cited by U.S. officials were wonderfully imaginative. In December 1926 and January 1927, with the Christmas holidays to stimulate the imagination, U.S. officials and their friends in the print media

⁹ The principal exceptions to this rule were the 1990 invasion of Panama and the 1994 intervention in Haiti.

solemnly endorsed charges leveled by pro-U.S. Nicaraguan politicians to the effect that the Liberal revolt led by Cesar Augusto Sandino formed part of a Mexican-Soviet plot “to establish a Bolshevist wedge between [the] continental United States and the Panama Canal,” as the *New York Times* breathlessly reported.¹⁰ In January, Secretary of State Frank Kellogg, seeking to justify the dispatch of Marines to re-occupy Nicaragua, entitled his formal statement to a skeptical Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Bolshevist Aims and Policies in Latin America.”¹¹ The Soviet leadership, which so far as is known had virtually no aims or policies toward Latin America, not even diplomatic relations with their Mexican co-conspirators, would have been surprised and delighted had any of Kellogg’s testimony proved to be true. The fact is that the United States has never faced a significant military threat from Latin America. Even in the most often cited case, that of Cuba in 1962, the Pentagon did not believe that the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba had altered the global strategic balance of nuclear terror.¹²

The Cuban case is especially fascinating because of the long debate over whether the Cuban leadership pulled the country into the Soviet bloc or was pushed to do so by evidence of U.S hostility. Even more interesting is the suggestion that the Soviets, whose

¹⁰ *New York Times*, “New Aspect Given Nicaragua Policy,” January 5, 1927, pp 1ff.

¹¹ The full text, 3328 words, of Kellogg’s imaginative statement was published on page two of the *New York Times* on January 13, 1927.

¹² Some retrospective ambiguity on this point has crept into many accounts of the October 1962 Missile Crisis, but the “Summary of Agreed Facts and Premises, Possible Courses of Action and Unanswered Questions,” prepared by Special Counsel to the President Theodore Sorensen after a series of initial meetings of the decision makers, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is quite clear: “It is generally agreed that these missiles, even when fully operational, do not significantly alter the balance of power – i.e., they do not significantly increase the potential megatonnage capable of being unleashed on American soil, even after a surprise American nuclear strike. The Soviet purpose in making this move is not understood – whether it is for purposes of diversion, harassment, provocation or bargaining.” The text of Sorensen’s memo is in *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* edited by Laurence Change and Peter Kornbluh (New York: The New Press, 1992), 124-25

foreign and defense policies often seemed rooted in nineteenth-century notions of spheres of influence, were prepared to abstain from aiding and protecting Cuba in exchange for some indication of U.S. willingness to resolve differences over the status of Berlin or refrain from deploying obsolete nuclear missiles in Turkey. How else is one to interpret Nikita Khrushchev's comments to John F. Kennedy at their first meeting in Vienna in June 1961? The U.S. government's summary of their conversation on June 3 has Khrushchev saying,¹³

As to Fidel Castro, he was no Communist but when the U.S. put pressure on him and applied sanctions against him, the USSR came to his assistance, in the form of trade and technical support. Under the influence of this aid he may turn Communist, but Mr. Khrushchev said, he as a Communist could not see which way Castro would go. Mr. Khrushchev then expressed the hope that the relations between the US and Cuba would improve in such fields as trade, etc. Such a statement, Mr. Khrushchev observed, might sound strange to the United States, but the USSR believes that such a development would improve relations not only in the Western Hemisphere, but also throughout the world. Mr. Khrushchev then referred to Turkey...

Kennedy did not respond to Khrushchev's remarks on Cuba. To the contrary, when he returned to the United States, he ordered U.S. forces to a higher state of readiness and mobilized National Guard units all over the country to signal U.S. "resolve" in the face of Khrushchev's threats.¹⁴ In short, the U.S. government declined an opportunity to negotiate a reduction in Soviet aid to Cuba in order to avoid negotiating on other issues, confident that it could dispose of the irritating Cuban regime without making concessions elsewhere.

¹³ "Memorandum of conversation between President Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the Vienna Summit, June 3, 1961," in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ The "threats" became a reality when the Soviets correctly interpreted Kennedy's action as signaling a rejection of any flexibility on the status of Berlin or the division of Germany. The Berlin Wall went up in August, two months after the Vienna meeting.

In some of our 41 cases, the claims that U.S. security required overthrowing governments in the region were made solely to generate public and congressional support, but not taken seriously by the key decision makers who made them.¹⁵ At other times, policymakers cited real threats elsewhere on the planet to explain actions in the western hemisphere that bore no relation to U.S. security, relying perhaps on the median voter's notoriously shaky grasp of the earth's physical and human geography.¹⁶

In the few cases of U.S. hostility to other governments in which U.S. security was plausibly invoked, the threat cited was always a *potential* threat with a low probability of ever materializing. A good example is the case of Nicaragua in the 1980s. Reagan administration officials and supporters usually cited one or more of three implausible threats to justify arming the Contra terrorists based in Honduras. The first was a variety of domino theory, pushed especially by the Central Intelligence Agency briefers and the President's Commission on Central America headed by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, according to which the political preferences of two million Nicaraguans might filter across three international borders, through jungles, and around mountains to persuade 80 million Mexicans to become implacable foes allied to the Soviet Union. Central America did not matter much, according to director of Central Intelligence William Casey, but Mexico was teetering on the brink.¹⁷ The two other commonly cited threats were the prospect that Soviet land-based missiles might be installed in Nicaragua

¹⁵ The invasion of Granada in 1983 fits well in this category. The White House devoted most of its time to celebrating the rescue of U.S. medical students, who did not feel threatened until the U.S. started shooting.

¹⁶ This may help to explain the initial public tolerance of the proposition that serious threats were emanating from Central America in the 1980s; see below.

¹⁷ The CIA's senior Latin American analyst, John R. Horton, resigned in disgust after Casey repeatedly exaggerated threats to Mexico's stability. *New York Times*, "Analyst Said to Have Quit CIA in Dispute," by Philip Taubman, September 28, 1984.

and the possibility that the Soviets could threaten the Panama Canal from Nicaragua. Neither of these “threats” caused any lost sleep at the Pentagon. Land-based missiles were already obsolete; Soviet submarines with multiple warhead missiles could lurk undetected much closer to U.S shores. And the Panama Canal had long since ceased to serve any useful military purpose because it is too narrow for U.S. aircraft carriers to fit through. (In fact, the U.S. has maintained a “two-ocean” navy ever since the canal opened.) None of the threats commonly cited by politicians and editorial writers were at all troubling to serious security analysts at the time.

The only plausible threat that could have been posed by a potentially hostile Nicaragua to the security of the United States, arose from the possibility that the Nicaraguans might one day permit the Soviet Union to build air bases in their country from which Soviet aircraft could attack shipping in the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) that pass through the Caribbean to Western Europe.¹⁸ In the event of an all out Soviet conventional arms attack on Western Europe, argued security analyst Michael Desch, these SLOCs would be crucial to the U.S. effort to rush military supplies to NATO forces. To prevent Nicaragua-based Soviet aircraft from attacking ships in the Caribbean SLOCs, the United States would have to divert aircraft from the defense of Western Europe for the day or two it might take to destroy the Soviet bases. Assuming that the United States and its NATO allies did not wish to escalate the conflict by resorting to nuclear weapons, and that Soviet tank armies would sweep across the north German plain at breakneck speed, any delay in the arrival of even a small number of U.S. aircraft could result in the loss of Western Europe to Communist aggression. Thus,

¹⁸"Turning the Caribbean Flank: SLOC Vulnerability During a European War," *Survival*, 29:6 (November/ December 1987): 528-551.

the fate of Western Europe might well depend on the success of U.S. efforts to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Though the Nicaraguan government repeatedly stated that it had no intention of ever permitting foreign military bases on its territory and said that it would be pleased to sign an international treaty to that effect, the government of the United States was not impressed by this trickery.

It is unlikely that any significant military threat would ever have materialized if the 41 governments deposed by the United States between 1898 and 1994 had remained in office until voted out or overturned without U.S. help. This was even true in the 1960s, when the United States helped to depose nine governments, most of them elected democratically -- about one every 13 months, more than in any other decade. We now know that U.S. decision makers were repeatedly assured by experts in the CIA and other intelligence gathering agencies that, in the words of a 1968 National Intelligence Estimate, "In no case do insurgencies pose a serious short run threat...revolution seems unlikely in most Latin American countries within the next few years."¹⁹

IV

In both the United States and Latin America, economic interests are often seen as the underlying cause of U.S. interventions. This hypothesis has two variants. One cites corruption and the other blames capitalism. The corruption hypothesis contends that U.S. officials order interventions to protect U.S. corporations. The best evidence for this version comes from the decision to depose the elected government of Guatemala in 1954. Except for President Dwight Eisenhower, every significant decision maker in this case had a family, business or professional tie to the United Fruit Company, whose interests

¹⁹ *FRUS, 1964-68*, vol. 31, p. 170-71.

were adversely affected by an agrarian reform and other policies of the incumbent government.²⁰ Nonetheless, in this as in every other case involving U.S. corporate interests, the U.S. government would probably not have resorted to intervention in the absence of other concerns. As the Guatemalan Communist leader Manuel Fortuny put it, “They would have overthrown us even if we had grown no bananas.”²¹

The capitalism hypothesis, or what Lars Schoultz calls “the drive to promote U.S. economic development,” is more sophisticated. It holds that the United States intervened not to save individual companies but to save the private enterprise system, thus benefiting all U.S. (and Latin American) private interests with a stake in the region. This is a more plausible argument, based on repeated declarations by U.S. officials, who seldom miss an opportunity to praise free enterprise. Capitalism was not at risk, however, in any of the U.S. interventions. In a number of cases, the U.S. intervention occurred against the backdrop of impending or actual economic crises that imperiled many private enterprises, but in most of these cases (Chile in 1973 or Nicaragua in the 1980s, for example), the economic crises were in large part the result of deliberate U.S. policies aimed at making the incumbent regime unpopular and thus more vulnerable. In these cases, it was the U.S. decision to intervene that provoked the economic crisis, not the reverse.²² Moreover, the United States did not intervene to overthrow most

²⁰ See, for example, Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Expanded edition, Cambridge: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 1999).

²¹ Quoted in Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-54* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 366.

²² This is not meant to imply that the incumbent governments bore no responsibility for the economic crises they faced. It is important to note that in these two and other cases, however, U.S. policies played a significant role not only in contributing to external imbalances (by, inter alia, ending access to multilateral financing), but also in persuading opposition forces to confront

governments that mismanaged their economic and fiscal affairs, not even in the Caribbean, where the United States has been overthrowing governments most frequently, often at little or no expense, since 1898.

It is true, of course, that U.S. policymakers sought throughout the past century to promote U.S. trade and investment in Latin America. Latin American governments have generally viewed such economic ties in a positive light, though the major economies of the region adhered to protectionist tariff policies until the mid-1980s or later and in some periods regulated or taxed foreign direct investment in ways that discouraged new flows of capital. Only three of the 41 U.S. interventions appear to have involved disputes over trade policy or the treatment of U.S. investment, and even in these cases, these disputes were not cited by U.S. authorities as a cause of the U.S. intervention.²³

V

The U.S. government's proclaimed ideological (and occasionally practical) preference for democratic regimes does not help explain why the United States intervened in most cases. U.S. officials ordered interventions to overthrow elected governments (twelve of the 41 cases) more often than to restore democratic regimes in Latin America (six of the 41 cases). Thus, a preference for democracy also fails to carry much explanatory power.²⁴

rather than compromise on fiscal issues, as in Chile, or to make sound fiscal policy impossible due to rising defense costs (Nicaragua).

²³ The three cases are Mexico (1913), Guatemala (1954), and Chile (1973).

²⁴ Some recent work suggests that foreign direct investment tends to prefer authoritarian regimes; see John P. Tuman and Craig F. Emmert, "The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America: A Reappraisal," *Latin American Research Review*, 29.3 (2004): 9-28.

VI

An economist might approach the thorny questions of causality not by asking what consumers or investors say about their preferences, but what their actions can help us to infer about them. Supply side logic, for example, would suggest that interventions will occur more often where they do not cost much, either directly in terms of decision makers' time and resources, or in terms of damage to significant interests. To put it another way, it should not be surprising to find that U.S. interventions have occurred most frequently where the direct costs of the intervention and the potential costs of failure have been lowest, as in the Caribbean and Central America. The classic case of a cheap intervention was the invasion of Granada in 1983. Secretary of State George Schultz barely mentioned it in his memoirs. Serious people had important matters to attend to. Schultz assigned Granada to his Deputy, Kenneth Dam, who adroitly deflected attention to the triumphant White House.²⁵

On the demand side, two factors seem to have been crucial in tipping decision makers toward intervention: global strategy and domestic politics. The United States in the 20th century defined its strategic interests in global terms. This was particularly true after World War II when the United States moved rapidly to project its power into regions of the earth on the periphery of the Communist states where it had never had a presence before. In the case of Latin America, where the United States faced no threat, policy planners did nonetheless find much to keep them busy. To project power into the strategically important regions of the planet, the U.S. had to demonstrate that it possessed the capacity and will to intervene in Latin America where no significant

²⁵ See Eldon Kenworthy, "Grenada as Theater," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 1 (Spring 1984): 635-51; John A. Lent, "Mass media in Grenada : three lives in a decade," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 62 (Winter 1985): 755-62.

strategic or economic interests were threatened. This meant that the United States could not afford to tolerate governments that failed to conform to U.S. policy preferences, even when the consequences of their deviations affected no significant U.S. interest. The problem with credibility as a guide to policymaking is that it unhinged U.S. policy aims from the discipline imposed by the calculated pursuit of recognizable U.S. interests.²⁶

Predictably, U.S. policy in Latin America, especially in the Caribbean where interventions were relatively cheap, came to be linked to the vagaries of U.S. domestic politics. A good example of the dominance of domestic politics over good policymaking is the decision taken by President Lyndon Johnson to order U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965. It now seems clear that he did so not because of any plausible threat to the United States, or even to the Dominican Republic. The threat he feared was much closer – the Republicans in Congress who were waiting to criticize him for failing to prevent “another Cuba.”²⁷ Political competition within the United States accounts for the disposition of many U.S. presidents to order interventions, including most notably President Reagan’s obsession with Central America, which was not shared by any of the more experienced and capable officials in his administration, and the first President Bush’s preoccupation with General Noriega in Panama.

²⁶ A variant of the credibility conundrum is that doctrine of strategic denial, that is, the argument that the United States had to control of certain areas of the globe, including entire continents, to deny *potential* enemies access to raw materials, logistical support, or intangible assets, such as political or diplomatic support. For an unusually plausible statement of this view, see Michael C. Desch, *When the Third World Matters: Latin America and United States Grand Strategy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

²⁷ See, for example, Eric Thomas Chester, *Rag-Tags, Scum, Riff-Raff and Commies: The U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965-1966* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

In a region where intervention was not very costly, and even major failures unlikely to damage U.S. interests, the lack of discipline encouraged by credibility concerns often led U.S. administrations to allow domestic political competition to overwhelm other considerations in making decisions that resulted in violent changes of government and regime in twentieth-century Latin America.

VII

The political and ideological preferences that guided U.S. governments in intervening in Latin America were more conservative than those of either the U.S. or Latin American citizenry. This gap became most acute during the Cold War era. For over 40 years, from 1948-49 to the early 1990s, the US used its immense power and resources to ensure that Latin Americans had governments more conservative (and thus reliably anti-Communist) than Latin American voters were willing to elect or that U.S. citizens would have tolerated at home. The human cost of this effort was immense. Between 1960, by which time the Soviets had dismantled Stalin's gulags, and the Soviet collapse in 1990, the number of political prisoners, torture victims, and executions of non-violent political dissenters in Latin America vastly exceeded that of the Soviet Union and its East European satellites.

As the democratic regimes that were restored in the 1980s and early 1990s have consolidated, and Latin American voters have become more confident that they will last, they have begun redressing the imbalances inherited from the Cold War era. The region's persistent inequalities, which undermine economic growth, elevate poverty rates, and aggravate political and social instability, may now be addressed with the greater urgency they demand. It would serve the long term U.S. economic interests as

well as the official U.S. ideological preference for stable democratic regimes, if the United States were able to avoid repeating the past century's promiscuous and undisciplined interventionism.

SELECTED US INTERVENTIONS, 1898-1994

U.S. Direct Interventions Military/CIA activity that changed governments

Country	Year	Event Summary
Cuba	1898-1902	Spanish-American War
	1906-09	US ousts elected Pres. Palma; occupation regime
	1917-23	US reoccupation, gradual withdrawal
Dominican Rep	1916-24	U.S. occupation
	1961	Assassination of Pres. Trujillo
	1965	U.S. Armed Forces occupy Sto Domingo
Grenada	1983	U.S. Armed Forces occupy island; oust government
Guatemala	1954	C.I.A.-organized armed force ousts Pres. Arbenz
Haiti	1915-34	U.S. occupation
	1994	U.S. troops restore constitutional government
Mexico	1914	Veracruz occupied; US allows rebels to buy arms
Nicaragua	1910	Troops to Corinto, Bluefields during revolt
	1912-25	U.S. occupation
	1926-33	U.S. occupation
	1981-90	Contra war; then support for opposition in election
Panama	1903-14	U.S. Troops secure protectorate, canal
	1989	U.S. Armed Forces occupy nation

US Indirect Interventions: Government/regime changes in which US is decisive

Country	Year	Event Summary
Bolivia	1964	Military coup ousts elected Pres. Paz Estenssoro
	1971	Military coup ousts Gen. Torres
Brazil	1964	Military coup ousts elected Pres. Goulart
Chile	1973	Coup ousts elected Pres. Allende.
	1988-89	Aid to anti-Pinochet opposition
Cuba	1933	U.S. abandons support for Pres. Machado
	1934	U.S. sponsors coup by Col. Batista to oust Pres. Grau
Dominican Rep.	1914	U.S. secures ouster of Gen. José Bordas
	1963	Coup ousts elected Pres. Bosch
El Salvador	1961	Coup ousts reformist civil-military junta
	1979	Coup ousts Gen. Humberto Romero
	1980	U.S. creates and aids new Christian Demo junta
Guatemala	1963	U.S. supports coup vs. elected Pres. Ydígoras
	1982	U.S. supports coup vs. Gen. Lucas Garcia
	1983	U.S. supports coup vs. Gen. Rios Montt
Guyana	1953	CIA aids strikes; government is ousted
Honduras	1963	Military coup ousts elected Pres. Villeda Morales
Mexico	1913	U.S. Amb. H. L. Wilson organizes coup vs. Madero
Nicaragua	1909	Support for rebels vs. Zelaya government
	1979	U.S. pressures Pres. Somoza to leave
Panama	1941	US supports coup ousting elected Pres. Arias
	1949	US supports coup ousting constitutional government of VP Chanís
	1969	U.S. supports coup by Gen. Torrijos