
Was The US Just Or Legitimate in Intervening In Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua

Throughout the 20th century, almost all countries Latin America suffered under authoritarian right-wing or military government. Most if not all of these governments had the backing and support of the US government. This backing continued despite the atrocities performed by these regimes or in their name, or even directly funded such acts. In Guatemala and El Salvador, right-wing military governments were funded and praised while they oppressed their people, and practised inhumanity. In Nicaragua, on the other hand, the US funded a rebel group (the Contra) opposing the elected government, who they trained and funded, and even encouraged to commit barbarities.

The general reasons given for the US' intervention in this region was the wellbeing of the people; the policy of containment, to aggressively prevent the spread of communism, provided an excuse to oppose the left-wing government of Nicaragua, and to support military governments seen to oppose communism. Furthermore, a reason still used to this day was to foster the spreading of democracy - Nicaragua's elections were defamed as undemocratic, while the highly dubious elections held in El Salvador and Guatemala during the time of heavy US involvement were praised as proof of flourishing democracy left in the US' wake.

Often invoked during this period, though not explicitly, was the Monroe Doctrine. This doctrine, passed in 1823, established the United States' right to do as it wished in South America, in defence against European imperialism, or later 'communism', due to its being in America's own backyard.

However, there is also what may be called an alternative hypothesis for America's intervention, and how far it was successful. This would suggest that the motivations and actions of the US were not in the interest of the people (although containment still played a major role). It may be said that the intervention of the US in the region was motivated more by corporate lobbying or interests, such as that of the United Fruit Company, who had significant interests in the region. The success and justness of the actions of the US are also dubious, with the democratic nature of elections being highly doubtful, and with them reportedly encouraging the execution of atrocities by the Contra.

Through examining the events in the three mentioned countries in the latter half of the 20th century, I aim to reach a conclusion on the motives of the US, and the justness or success of their actions.

In Guatemala, 1954, the US sponsored a military coup which resulted in military regimes maintaining power for the next 42 years, as well as a vicious civil war for most of that time.

The elected left-wing government of Jacobo Árbenz was overthrown for being 'too soft on communism' following its sweeping and successful economic and social reforms, which had limited the overbearing power of landowners and protected workers against backbreaking labour standards. The United Fruit Company, who then lost out on profit due to the fair treatment of workers, heavily lobbied the United States' to overthrow the left-wing government,

with the promise of their support and cheap fruits for American markets. Following a right-wing coup with strong US backing, the US then maintained their support through the funding and training of Guatemalan government forces during the ensuing civil war.

These forces went on to conduct widespread war crimes, ranging from the genocide of the Mayan people¹ to the 'disappearance' of around 40,000 individuals during the conflict. The genocide included 626 massacres and the (acknowledged) destruction of 440 villages. Estimates for total Mayans killed range from 32,632 to 166,000, with the total number of people dying in the civil war being around 200,000. Furthermore, it was estimated that 93% of human rights abuses were committed by government forces, and only 3% by the guerillas².

This support also extended to future elections, with the American government and press widely reporting them as 'democratic', despite failing every recognised check for a democratic election. The military government routinely executed dissidents, put substantial military pressure on voters, and allowed widespread election fraud. The true opposition - the rebels supported by the people - were also barred from standing, with their only choices being between moderately similar right-wing parties, each of whom was only allowed to run because it was known they would either lose or perform their tasks of suppressing the people correctly.

El Salvador had suffered a right-wing or military government from 1931 onwards, sustaining their power through force and staggering election fraud, and maintaining a vastly unequal and unjust society.

Attempts by a new government in mid-1979 to gain support by projecting a populist image through land redistribution and the establishment of a national bank were met with great hostility by the elites and military, and they were quickly thwarted. A wide-reaching left-wing coalition (the FMLN), supported by much of the working classes, was formed soon after in 1980, aiming for insurrection against the government. In the civil war which ensued, the military government, with great US support, committed many human rights violations, although the FMLN was of course not innocent.

Despite this, the UN estimates that 85% of killings, kidnappings and torture were committed by government forces³. US support extended to \$1-2 million per day⁴, and funded the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as the use of death squads against civilians⁵. The use of these death squads became widespread, from the deliberate targeting of civilians to their complicity in the 'disappearances' of dissidents and killing of members of the church attempting to aid those in need.

One such attack on the clergy was the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero after he published an open letter to President Carter, requesting the suspension of US aid and support for the atrocities of the war. This killing was confirmed by the UN to have been ordered by army major Roberto D'Aubuisson⁶, who went on to become a successful politician. A week later, 42 peaceful mourners were then shot by government forces at his funeral⁷. Civilian massacres were widespread, and even the rape and murder of US nuns providing assistance to the victims of death squads would only lead to a six-week suspension in aid, which was subsequently stepped up⁸.

Elections were held in 1982, following the rejection of the FMLN's request for a peace settlement and a broad government. This election was hailed as a miracle of democracy in war

by the media and government of the US despite the fact that the choice was between similarly right wing candidates, and the complete lack of representation of the FMLN opposition, as well as palpable military presence.

The election campaign also involved the government threatening non-voters with the label of 'traitor', and the complete absence of a secret ballot - the ballot boxes used were completely clear.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is an outlier when compared to the first two, as the US government was not in financial, political or military support of its ruling government, due to its left-wing nature under the Sandinistas in the 1980s.

However, the situation shares many traits with those around it in the continent, with the domestically successful left-wing government coming under heavy fire from the US in the name of containing 'communism' and maintaining cheap goods for American markets. The Sandinistas, much like the early Guatemalan government, had implemented reforms to limit the power of landowners as well as labour exploitation and was well on its way to making its country truly democratic and in the hands of the many, not the few.

However, right-wing forces within the country, supported by the US, fabricated or exaggerated claims to delegitimize the government, and began an armed revolution, which of course involved training and financing by America.

A notable part of their support was of death squads, specialising in making people 'disappear' through extrajudicial killings. These forces - the Contras - engaged in systemic war crimes which they and the US then denied or avoided, with the US using propaganda to downplay these claims whilst simultaneously encouraging the Contras to attack civilian targets with the aim of blaming them on the Sandinista government. Just like Guatemala and El Salvador, Nicaragua also held elections around the same time. These were labelled as undemocratic by the government and media of the US, despite many professional bodies and a delegation from the Irish Parliament observing it firsthand, and acknowledging that it met all checks for a democratic election to a satisfactory level⁹.

There was no military pressure exerted on citizens by the government, no 'disappearance' of dissidents, a true representation of the political spectrum, with the opposition (the rebels) turning down the offer to stand (only to call it undemocratic for the lack of representation). There was also a secret ballot, unlike that of El Salvador, and there was no legal or military pressure to vote at all. This vote was then won by the Sandinistas, with 67% of the vote, proving their popular support.

However, there were also allegations of human rights allegations made against the Sandinista government at the time. This included censorship of the press, particularly La Prensa, a paper which had been critical of the previous regime. Reporting had to be submitted seven hours before printing, and that which was negative on the government was supposedly banned¹⁰. However, these claims come from the Heritage Foundation, a heavily conservative think tank, and dubious source. In the modern day, they are climate change deniers funded by ExxonMobil¹¹. A french journalist living in Nicaragua's capital at the time reported, on the

contrary, that most radio channels were anti-Sandinista, and freely allowed, and La Prensa was largely free of the government's hand¹².

There were also accusations of more violent violations. The treatment of the native Miskito people involved the forced relocation of over 15,000, whose homes were destroyed, with the government not only turning a blind eye to their killings, but promoting them¹⁰. The Heritage Foundation also claimed that there was a distinct rise in anti-semitic attacks or discrimination. However, multiple investigations involving the UN and other organisations found no evidence of large scale or systematic discrimination or abuse. This further contributes to the discreditation of the Heritage Foundation as a particularly valuable or unbiased source.

Evidence for acting in defence of the people/containment

The funding of the Contra's against the Sandinistas may have been justified by the accusations of human rights abuses by this government. These included mass executions¹³, and the oppression of the indigenous population - much like the accusations levelled at the Guatemalan government during their civil war.

While Nicaragua was not officially Communist, they were hard left, and continuously voted for Communist causes. Furthermore, they had close ties to the USSR, who provided economic, military and political support to the government. They even received military helicopters free of charge. The staffing of Cuban troops and diplomats (Soviet funded) in the country has been contended as making the country a member of the Communist block.

The funding of the El Salvadoran government against the FMLN may also be interpreted as a practice of containment. The US claimed that there was significant Communist influence on the group, due to Cuba's facilitation of its creation by negotiations. However, this is disputed, as the group largely formed independently, and did not receive even a majority of supplies from the USSR/Cuba. Despite this, the clear left-wing nature of the group may still qualify it to be opposed by containment.

In Guatemala, the origins of the 1954 coup may also lie in containment. During this period, the US largely viewed all left-wing governments as Communists or thereabout, and they deemed it too far when a communist party was formally legalized. However, even an attempt by the CIA to find links between Guatemala and the Soviets in order to retroactively justify the coup - Operation PBHISTORY - failed to turn up any evidence. Furthermore, the actions of the installed dictator, Armas, largely imposed all the horrors of a Communist regime upon the people, save from the economic system. This included banning opposition parties, torturing opponents and reversing many social reforms of the revolution. This lends strength to the idea that the motivation of the intervention was not humanitarian in any form, but purely economic, as the country then became open to corporate investment - for example by the United Fruit Company.

Question of free elections

In Guatemala, 1982, elections were held. These were reported in the USA as a sign of flourishing democracy (against an onslaught of Communism). However, the democratic nature of these elections does not spread very far beyond the description. The military government routinely executed dissidents, put substantial military pressure on voters, and allowed

widespread election fraud. The true opposition - the rebels supported by the people - were also barred from standing, with their only choices being between moderately similar right-wing parties. Furthermore, as mentioned, opposition parties had been banned for many years, and political opponents tortured, imprisoned and killed. This contributed to a lack of choice, as well as citizens voting out of fear.

Elections were held in 1982, following the rejection of the FMLN's request for a peace settlement and a broad government. This election was hailed as a miracle of democracy in war by the media and government of the US despite the fact that there were no left-wing candidates represented in the election. The election campaign also involved the government threatening non-voters with the label of 'traitor', and the complete absence of a secret ballot - the ballot boxes used were completely clear, a fact even mentioned by Time magazine. This again shows that the US was not truly aiming to spread democracy, as it praised an election which clearly failed many checks one would consider necessary for a democratic election - freedom for citizens to choose, broad choice/representation, secret ballot, etc. The assembly elected later voted to choose the president. This choice was between three military-nominated candidates, with all others barred, again showing the true absence of democracy at the time.

In Nicaragua on the other hand, there were far more democratic conditions present during the election. This included avoidance of mechanisms to identify whether or how individuals voted - such as ID cards or clear ballot boxes, as well as a clear lack of military pressure exerted by the government, as opposed to Guatemala or El Salvador. This was also coupled with broader voter choice - qualifying was far easier (as opposed to in Guatemala, where 4,000 signatures were needed), and the government even coupled the election with literacy/registration campaign, to give voters greater ease. In El Salvador, on the other hand, over half the population was illiterate and struggled with the modern voting systems. It also goes without saying that there was an absence of political killings in Nicaragua, and those in opposition to the government were not routinely threatened or murdered by the state. The election was also concluded to be free and fair by delegates from the LASA (Latin American Studies Association), EEC, Canada, and Ireland, among others. Many in opposition to the government sought to delegitimise the elections by abstaining, despite the fact that it was completely safe and legal for them to run. The denunciation of these elections by the US government as a 'Soviet-style sham' were completely baseless and widely opposed.

In this comparative light, one may question whether the US was truly acting in the interests of the people and democracy, as well as with integrity. It supported and praised elections in right-wing states with its backing, despite the failure of numerous checks for a democratic election, while funding rebels against one of the few states in the region to hold acknowledged democratic elections. This again lends strength to the argument that the US was not operating in the pursuit of democracy in the region or the wellbeing of the people. This points to their motivations lying either in simply wanting control over the region or having economic interests.

Evidence of corporate motivations

When the new Guatemalan government came in in 1944, implementing laws in the pursuit of the wellbeing of its people, and economic success, the United Fruit Company felt personally targeted. This was because new policies, among other things, allowed workers to strike when wage or safety standards were not met, as they often were¹⁴. Previously, the UFC had capped its workers salaries at 50 cents a day, not just allowed by the government, but at its request¹⁵.

Furthermore, only 15% of their 550,000 hectares was being cultivated - meaning the remaining idle land was involved in agrarian reform, which involved granting property to landless peasants¹⁴.

This led to intensive lobbying of the US government by the UFC, in an attempt to protect their inflated interests in Guatemala. They persuaded multiple Congressmen to criticize the Guatemalan government for not protecting the UFC's interest - despite the fact that it was clear to Guatemalans that, "their country was being mercilessly exploited by foreign interests which took huge profits without making any contributions to the nation's welfare"¹⁵. It also spent large sums on further lobbying, and funded a highly exaggerated report concerning the Guatemalan government's reforms, and a campaign to smear the reforming government as Communist. It was estimated over half a million dollars was spent by the UFC alone to persuade the American people and government of the need to overthrow the Guatemalan government.

Involvement in atrocities

While American troops did not directly execute the atrocities of which the Contra have been accused of by numerous groups, such as Americas Watch, it directly funded them, and, it has been alleged, encouraged them. These atrocities included targeting civilians, indiscriminate attacks on individuals and houses, kidnappings, torture, and more. A former Contra, Edgar Chamorro testified to the World Court that, 'the CIA did not discourage such tactics... We were told that the only way to defeat the Sandinistas was to...kill, kidnap, rob and torture...'. He also recalled severe criticism from the CIA when admitting the FDN (the largest Contra group) regularly kidnapped and executed reform workers and civilians.

The most senior CIA official involved, Duane Clarridge, also admitted to House Intelligence Committee staff in 1984 that the Contras were routinely murdering 'civilians and Sandinista officials in the provinces, as well as heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors and judges'.

This failure to discourage or reprimand human rights abuses was also found in Guatemala and El Salvador. As mentioned, the countless extra-judicial killings, most notably of Archbishop Romero, were often carried out by death squads involved in US funding. Even the rape and murder of four US aid working nuns resulted in a short cut in funding to Guatemala, before it was then resumed at a higher level.