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# IW PERSPECTIVES

## American Irregular Warfare in Latin America

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History is a matter of perspective; one of the best examples is American involvement in Latin America. The United States' interest in Latin America is generally perceived to be centered upon gaining access to commodities or serving political and economic interests. It is argued that American economic involvement is of recent origin, a consequence of post-World War II policies establishing both the Pax Americana and the Open Door of universal access to resources. Throughout history, the principal motivation behind most U.S. interventions in Latin America has been safeguarding U.S. interests and preventing perceived threats to national security. Perhaps these interventions often came at the expense of Latin American nations, compromising their sovereignty and stability. Nonetheless, what was the alternative, to open the gates to European intervention and the loss of access to their resources? This paradox highlights the need for strategic approaches to irregular warfare in Latin America. We must choose between continuing historical methods that prioritize U.S. interests without regard for the consequences to Latin American nations or learning from history to design intervention policies that protect U.S. interests while respecting regional states' sovereignty and stability.





## **IRREGULAR WARFARE**

Irregular warfare is as old as warfare itself. To grasp its past, present, and future exploits in Latin American foreign relations, we must study its history. A critical feature of irregular warfare is how it blurs the lines between the battlefield and the battle area and between fighters and civilians. This blurring of boundaries makes irregular warfare so dominant and common throughout time. Today, there is a high level of relevance on irregular warfare in the Department of Defense (DoD), which has recently released a new definition. The DoD [defines Irregular Warfare](#) “as a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce state or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.” In the framework of great power competition, we find ourselves again in a situation like that of the Cold War; however, today, we do not face only one powerful nation; we face two.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE GENESIS OF INTERVENTION**

Evidence suggests that overt and covert actions have fostered dependency and dominance between the United States and Latin American nations. These actions were taken to maintain a favorable climate for U.S. intervention in Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine claimed a U.S. stake in Latin American matters. World War II saw the U.S. lead an effort among American countries to keep Axis powers out of Latin America. However, the [U.S. got most involved in Latin America](#) during the Cold War. The goal to stop communism from spreading became a justification to ignore Latin American independence. The U.S. stepped in, claiming to protect Latin America from outside threats that could upset its role in the region. One could argue against this and highlight the negative results of these interventions. We must avoid presentism, evaluate the actors, relationships, tensions, and functions of their time, and assess based on their environment, not ours. As policymakers show new interest in using irregular warfare methods to compete, we need to learn how these plans worked in the past, especially with our Latin American neighbors, and develop practical concepts.

## **CASE STUDIES: GUATEMALA, CHILE, AND NICARAGUA**

The 1954 CIA-backed coup in Guatemala illustrates how the [U.S. used unconventional warfare](#). The U.S. government overthrew the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz. Arbenz had initiated land reforms that threatened the interests of American businesses, notably the United Fruit Company. After this, a military dictatorship took over, pushing Guatemala into years of civil conflict, which led to widespread human rights abuses and [thousands of deaths](#). This intervention placed American gains before a country’s right to choose its path.

In Nicaragua, the U.S. backed the Contras, rebels who fought the [Sandinista government in the 1980s](#). This backing included money, training, and weapons, even though the Sandinistas had won a fair election. The fight led to many civilian deaths and made the country unstable for years. The [Iran-Contra affairs](#), where money from selling arms to Iran was sent to help the Contras, hurt America’s image even more. It showed how far the U.S. would go to push its interests, even if it meant breaking



laws and making the region less stable. However, as we look at Nicaragua today, we see the adverse effects of socialism in the country. Ultimately, the U.S. efforts were unsuccessful, but the Nicaraguan population was the most adversely affected.

Chile stands out as another key example of U.S. intervention in Latin America. The [U.S. greatly impacted the downfall of Salvador Allende](#), Chile's elected President, in 1973. Worried about socialism growing in Latin America, the U.S. supported General Augusto Pinochet's military coup. Allende's death during the takeover marked the beginning of Pinochet's brutal rule, known for major human rights abuses such as torture and vanishing political opponents. The U.S. involvement in Chile's political turmoil did not just topple a valid government; it also initiated a time of extreme suffering for Chileans.

### **POSITIVE U.S. INTERVENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA: BRAZIL, PANAMA, AND COLOMBIA**

U.S. actions in Latin America often face criticism for their harmful effects, but several cases show that American involvement impacted positive change. In [Brazil](#), U.S. backing of democratic bodies and economic growth helped steady the country as it moved from military rule to democracy in the late 1900s. In [Panama](#), U.S. action played a crucial part in the 1989 effort to remove the corrupt Noriega government, which led to the return of democratic rule and stability. [Colombia](#) offers another case where U.S. help and teamwork have done a lot to fight drug gangs and rebel groups, creating a safer and livelier economic scene. In these examples, U.S. involvement backed the processes to stabilize, democratize, and build lasting ties and shared gains between the United States and these Latin American countries.

### **LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES AND REGIONAL RESULTS**

The long-term consequences of U.S. interventions remain palpable across Latin America, and it is easy to judge the decisions and actions of those in government when these interventions occur. Prolonged periods of instability, economic hardship, and distrust toward the United States are some effects felt by nations that experienced [American-led or supported coups](#) and insurgencies. The social fabric of these states was ripped apart. Civil wars, human rights abuse, economic hardship, and social splits left deep wounds. We cannot overlook how these events affected the culture and minds of people in these countries and their economies. Many Latin Americans who grew up in this chaotic region have inherited distrust of foreign meddling from the U.S. Many American diplomats in the area still grapple with this historical burden, which makes current diplomatic ties tricky and creates an atmosphere of mutual doubt.

However, what was the alternative? If the U.S. had not intervened, communism would have spread throughout the region, and today, we would be having a different discussion. What if Guatemala and Chile went socialist? We have seen the disastrous results of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. What about the domino effect in the Hemisphere? Proponents of U.S. intervention often argue that it was necessary to protect American economic interests, maintain regional stability, and prevent the spread



of communism. I sum myself to those with this position. We contend that U.S. actions ultimately benefited the [United States and Latin American](#) nations as we countered external threats and fostered economic growth. Furthermore, we argued that many of the region's challenges stem from internal factors such as corruption, inequality, and weak governance rather than solely from U.S. interference.

## **SOLUTIONS AND FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES**

Given the historical context of American interventions in Latin America and understanding the current operational environment, it is imperative to reconsider our approach to the region. The U.S. should devise a plan that shows respect for Latin American countries' right to run themselves while still looking out for American interests. A vital part of this strategy would be to learn from mistakes made in the past and recognize how our actions affect things in the long run. Take, for example, the CIA-backed coups in Guatemala and Chile and the help given to the Contras in Nicaragua. These interventions show how mistakes can happen when prioritizing American interests instead of respecting Latin American countries' right to rule themselves and finding shared solutions.

The [U.S. should form genuine alliances](#) grounded in shared goals and mutual respect. This concept requires backing democratic systems, boosting economic progress, and honoring Latin American nations' political decisions. Additionally, the U.S. must regain trust by admitting past errors and pledging a more transparent and considerate foreign policy. To make these shifts happen, the U.S. must change its outlook and dedicate itself to long-term engagement rather than quick-fix interventions. China is expanding its regional influence by buying land and accessing significant commodities and supply chain infrastructures. Russia continues to support strong men in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela, and the stakes are high for influence over the relevant populations. By favoring alliances and coalitions, the U.S. can promote a more stable and thriving Latin America that will serve American interests in the region.

## **CONCLUSION**

The legacy of American irregular warfare in Latin America is controversial and a clear example of how history is a matter of perspective. From Guatemala to Chile, we see a pattern of intervention that often caused long-lasting instability and fostered regional distrust. Nevertheless, U.S. interventions have had successful and positive results in Brazil, Panama, and Colombia. In the future, we must learn from our past mistakes and successes, aiming for a foreign policy that values collaboration over domination and respect over control. This is the only way we can build a future where countries can develop without outside meddling and where our foreign relations in Latin America are based on the ideas of sovereignty and self-rule.



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