Cold War in the Backyard: US Interventions in Latin America, 1945–1991

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Introduction

This book examines how the United States engaged with Latin America during the Cold War, from 1945 to 1991, when the hemisphere was cast as a front line in a global struggle against perceived communist expansion. In Washington, the region was frequently described as the nation's "backyard," a metaphor that naturalized hierarchy while obscuring the diversity and sovereignty of the countries within it. Policy makers embraced a toolkit that ranged from overt diplomacy and economic assistance to covert operations, psychological warfare, and support for military regimes. The result was a dense web of interventions—some spectacular, others quiet—that reshaped political trajectories across Central and South America.

Our investigation is anchored in declassified documents and survivor testimony. Memoranda, cables, and intelligence estimates—once locked away—now offer glimpses into the assumptions that guided decision-makers and the mechanisms they authorized. Testimonies from survivors, families of the disappeared, exiles, and rank-and-file participants add a human contour to the paper record, challenging sanitized narratives and revealing how abstract doctrines translated into everyday fear, resilience, and resistance. Taken together, these sources illuminate both intent and impact, as well as the dissonance between public rhetoric and private action.

The chapters that follow map recurring patterns. In moments of reform or revolutionary upheaval—Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in the early 1960s, Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1970–1973—Washington assessed local developments through the prism of containment, often blurring nationalism, social democracy, and Marxism into a single threat. Covert funds channeled through front organizations, selective economic pressure designed to "make the economy scream," training and equipping of security forces, and coordination with allied intelligence services all formed part of the repertoire. In Central America during the 1980s, counterinsurgency assistance and proxy warfare fused with the language of democracy promotion, even as paramilitary violence escalated and legal oversight at home strained and, at times, failed.

Interventions left marks that outlived the Cold War itself. Dictatorships institutionalized practices of torture and disappearance; civil wars displaced millions and tore at indigenous and Afro-descendant communities; militaries and police absorbed doctrines that prioritized internal enemies; and economies were reordered in ways that deepened inequality and constrained democratic choice. Yet the period also produced movements for human rights, innovative forms of transnational solidarity, and, later, truth commissions that sought to document crimes and craft a public memory. Understanding these legacies is crucial to grasping both contemporary politics in the Americas and the persistent debates over accountability, reparations, and transitional justice.

This is not a courtroom brief. It is a work of history attentive to context, causality, and contingency. We situate U.S. actions within broader geopolitical rivalries that included the roles of the Soviet Union and Cuba, as well as the agency of Latin American elites, militaries, parties, churches, unions, business associations, and social movements. Where the record is ambiguous or contradictory, we say so; where testimony complicates official narratives, we present the tension rather than force a premature resolution. Above all, we seek to explain how policy choices were made, who benefited, who suffered, and how societies confronted the aftermath.

The structure of the book moves chronologically while threading thematic analyses. Early chapters trace the formation of the national security state and its first experiments in the region. Middle chapters explore pivotal coups, insurgencies, and transnational repression, including Operation Condor. Later chapters delve into the Reagan era’s intensification of proxy conflict and the uneasy interplay between congressional oversight and executive secrecy, culminating in Iran-Contra. We conclude by examining the hinge year of 1991, when the Cold War ended but its architectures and memories continued to shape democratic transitions, security paradigms, and interstate relations across the Americas.

CHAPTER ONE: Setting the Stage: Hemispheric Security and the End of World War II (1945–1949)

Victory in 1945 arrived with paperwork and paradox. The United States had fought for a world safe for democracy, yet in Latin America it often acted as if the region required vigilant stewardship. The metaphor of the backyard took root in cables and memos not as a joke but as a premise, implying proximity, responsibility, and a right to prune. Diplomats, soldiers, and policy wonks returned from war with habits of classification, planning, and suspicion, and they brought them to a hemisphere where reformers, generals, and revolutionaries were already jockeying for advantage. The guns fell silent in Europe and Asia, but in capitals from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, new contests over land, labor, and loyalty began to hum like transformers after a storm.

The map itself invited trouble. The Americas were a long, uneven ribbon of states, some rich in minerals, others in grievances, many in both. A war that had modernized U.S. industry and centralized decision-making in Washington also taught policy makers to fear disruption in far-flung places. Raw materials from Latin America—rubber, tin, copper, oil—had kept arsenals humming, and planners wanted that flow steady even in peace. At the same time, returning soldiers and buoyant markets promised a consumer boom that could blur old colonial patterns into something cosier, more consensual, and more American. Yet beneath the bonhomie lay calculation. If Latin

America tipped toward disorder or radicalism, strategists reasoned, vulnerabilities at home might multiply, trade could fracture, and rivals could plant flags in a zone once presumed secure.

Washington’s postwar toolkit was already diversifying. Diplomatic notes shared space with intelligence estimates, while economic missions promised know-how and occasional cash. The lend-lease pipeline did not snap shut overnight, and surplus military goods kept arriving in ports, sometimes with strings attached and sometimes merely with expectations. Military missions reactivated old ties in countries where U.S. officers had trained local cadres before Pearl Harbor, and now they dusted off maps and curricula with renewed purpose. These were not yet coups in waiting, but they were rehearsals of influence, moments in which the grammar of cooperation began to include verbs like monitor, vet, and condition. The region was not occupied, but it was being inventoried.

Ideology played its part, though it wore different masks in different countries. In some places, the left looked like trade unionists demanding fairer pay; in others, it looked like radicals quoting Lenin in smoky cafes. To U.S. officials, the spectrum could blur into a single concern about who would control ports, police, and printing presses. Fascist sympathizers still lingered in parts of the hemisphere, their networks weakened but not vanished, while populists offered a volatile mix of nationalism and redistribution. Washington’s tolerance for variety had limits that shifted with headlines and harvests. The result was a selective openness to reform, so long as it did not trespass into property redistribution or foreign policy choices that smacked of non-alignment.

By 1946, signals were crossing the Atlantic that shaped how Latin America was seen. Winston Churchill’s iron curtain speech gave language to a division that many U.S. officials were already sensing in cables and coffee breaks. The Soviet Union emerged from war scarred but territorially enlarged, and communist parties in Latin America, though often small, gained glamour as proxies of a superpower. This was less about actual troop movements than about imagined dominoes. In Washington corridors, the fear was not that Moscow would invade Guatemala or Bolivia, but that local grievances could be steered, funded, and weaponized by clever outsiders. The map of Latin America began to look less like a neighborhood and more like a chessboard.

The Rio Pact of 1947 formalized a regional security vision that had been gestating since the war. Signed in Rio de Janeiro by most American states, it declared an armed attack on one to be an attack on all, with an eye toward hemispheric defense against extra-regional aggression. The treaty’s language was broad enough to allow future reinterpretation, and its mechanisms—consultation, coordination, joint planning—gave Washington new channels for influence. Some signatories saw insurance against bullying; others saw a gilded cage. Either way, the pact planted seeds for later alliances, training cycles, and a presumption that the United States had a natural role in organizing the neighborhood. It was not yet an occupation manual, but it was a foot in the door.

Economic diplomacy followed security talk with a softer shoe. Loans, technical missions, and commodity agreements promised to smooth the transition from war to peace, while keeping markets open for U.S. goods. In Brazil and Mexico, wartime industrialization had created new factories and ambitions, and U.S. officials hoped to steer that energy toward stability rather than state-led autarky. The Export-Import Bank expanded its footprint, offering credit that came with expectations about procurement, currency, and policy. This was not empire by conquest, but it was empire by spreadsheet, with interest rates and repayment schedules acting as quiet ambassadors. For many Latin American governments, the choice was less between accepting or rejecting U.S. influence than between accepting it on one set of terms or another.

Labor unrest gave urgency to these calculations. Strikes in mines, ports, and plantations reminded officials that economic recovery could be turbulent. In Bolivia and Chile, miners wielded enough leverage to halt production, and governments wavered between repression and negotiation. U.S. firms pressed Washington for help, fearing that radicalized workforces could spill into nationalization or worse. At the same time, social reformers argued that addressing inequities was the best insurance against upheaval. This tension shaped early postwar policy: how far to push for stability by backing reform, and how far to prioritize order by siding with property. The answers varied by country and by the temperament of local ambassadors, but the pattern was consistent. Anxiety about the left pushed policy toward preemptive containment.

The Communist Party of Guatemala gained legal status in 1945, and though its membership was modest, its presence in reformist coalitions caught Washington’s eye. The country’s revolution of October 1944 had toppled a dictator and opened space for debate about land, education, and voting rights. To U.S. observers, the question was not whether change was needed—most agreed it was—but whether change would stay within bounds. Officials scanned lists of new ministers and ambassadors for signs of radical infection, and they began to file names and affiliations. This was still early days, but a grammar of suspicion was taking shape, one that would later allow swift escalation from observation to intervention. The seeds of future policy were being planted in card files and cable traffic.

In Argentina, the immediate postwar drama had a different flavor. Juan Perón’s rise fused nationalism, labor mobilization, and a cult of personality that unsettled U.S. diplomats. His government leaned toward economic independence and a prickly sovereignty that chafed against wartime cooperation. Perón spoke of a “third position” between capitalism and communism, but Washington heard fence-sitting that could tip either way. Reports from the embassy oscillated between contempt and concern, noting Perón’s popularity among workers and his knack for outmaneuvering rivals. Efforts to isolate his regime through loans and diplomacy met limited success, teaching U.S. officials that popularity could defy economic pressure. This episode would linger in memory as a cautionary tale about underestimating charismatic nationalism.

The Central Intelligence Act of 1947 created a new institution that would soon reshape U.S. operations in the region. The Central Intelligence Agency was to coordinate intelligence and conduct covert activities as directed by the National Security Council. In its early years, the agency was still finding its footing, sorting personnel and procedures amid turf battles with the State Department and military services. Yet its mandate was clear enough to allow planning for special operations, propaganda, and political action. Latin America was not yet the agency’s main focus—Europe and the Soviet Union loomed larger—but the bureaucratic machinery was being assembled that would later enable coups, subsidies, and deniable interventions. The architecture of covert action was being drafted, even if the first blueprints were clumsy.

Survivor accounts from this period often emphasize the ordinary texture of change. A schoolteacher in Guatemala City might recall debates in faculty lounges about agrarian reform, unaware that distant officials were debating her government’s fate. A miner in Bolivia might remember the smell of dynamite and the sound of union songs, without knowing that U.S. labor attachés were filing reports on his union’s politics. These personal histories do not fit neatly into the cables that historians later declassify, but they remind us that policy moved through lived worlds. The postwar moment was not only about strategy and doctrine; it was about people trying to feed families, win rights, and avoid violence, all while larger powers calibrated risk.

By 1948, tensions in Europe and Asia were sharpening, and Latin America was increasingly seen through a security lens. The Soviet blockade of Berlin and the communist victory in China suggested a world in motion, and U.S. planners worried about vulnerabilities closer to home. Reports about weapons flows, training camps, and subversive literature circulated in classified channels. Some were accurate, others exaggerated, but the cumulative effect was a hardening of assumptions. The Monroe Doctrine, long a rhetorical shield, was being reinterpreted as a license to police ideological boundaries. This did not yet mean coups and bombing runs, but it did mean tighter surveillance, more restrictive aid conditions, and a growing tolerance for authoritarian partners who promised order.

The 1948 Bogotá Conference illustrated both cooperation and contradiction. Delegates from across the Americas gathered to discuss hemispheric issues, and the meeting produced the Organization of American States charter, which enshrined principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Yet the event was marred by riots in the Colombian capital, and U.S. observers interpreted the unrest as evidence of communist agitation. This perception hardened attitudes even as diplomats signed agreements affirming mutual respect. The dissonance between stated ideals and operational assumptions would repeat itself throughout the Cold War, often with explosive consequences. For now, it signaled that policy would privilege containment over consistency.

In Mexico, the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party navigated postwar politics with a mixture of statist economics and anti-communist credentials. President Miguel Alemán pursued infrastructure projects and welcomed U.S. investment while keeping leftists at bay. This model—developmental, nationalist, but firmly within the Western camp—was seen as a template worth encouraging elsewhere. U.S. officials praised Mexico’s stability even as they worried about contagion from less predictable neighbors. The bilateral relationship was pragmatic, colored by migration, trade, and security, and it illustrated how Washington could work with one-party systems so long as they kept the left marginalized and borders orderly.

The year 1949 brought more signs of institutionalization. The National Security Council produced reports that framed Latin America’s challenges in terms of long-term struggle. Training grants and military assistance programs began to formalize, with curricula that emphasized counterintelligence and internal security. The FBI opened liaison offices in several capitals, sharing information and methods with local police. None of this was secret, exactly, but it was part of a slow shift toward treating the hemisphere as an extension of U.S. security concerns. Congress approved funds with little dissent, trusting that economic growth and anti-communism went hand in hand. The public saw goodwill tours and technical missions; behind the scenes, planners drew up lists and scenarios.

Climate and culture shaped perceptions as well. U.S. officials often viewed Latin America through stereotypes that blended admiration and condescension, seeing volatility and passion as obstacles to orderly progress. These biases influenced who was listened to and who was dismissed. Reformers who spoke the language of technical modernization found more open doors than those who emphasized structural inequality. This filtering of voices helped set the terms of debate, nudging policy toward solutions that preserved existing hierarchies while promising incremental change. The result was a selective reformism that could accommodate land settlement programs, for example, but balked at wholesale redistribution.

Intelligence collection in this period relied on a patchwork of sources. Embassy staff filed political reports, military attachés tracked arms purchases, and consular officers noted labor disputes. The CIA’s fledgling network included exiles, journalists, and business contacts, some of whom traded gossip for access. Information was often fragmentary and colored by the agendas of those providing it, but it fed a growing apparatus of assessment. The temptation to connect dots into conspiracies was strong, and analysts sometimes saw coordination where there was only coincidence. Still, the system was learning, refining methods that would later be used to justify more aggressive measures.

The Cold War in these early years was as much about economic models as about ideology. Officials debated whether state-led development could coexist with U.S. interests or whether it inevitably bred dependency on rival powers. The success of Mexico’s state oil industry and Brazil’s steel mill projects raised questions about the line between nationalism and subversion. In Washington, the answer often depended on who was in charge and how amenable they were to U.S. corporate interests. This pragmatic calibration would guide decisions about aid, sanctions, and diplomatic recognition, shaping relationships long before covert action entered the picture.

Public opinion in the United States was broadly supportive of anti-communism but largely indifferent to Latin American complexities. News coverage focused on coups and crises, with less attention to the slow work of institution-building. This asymmetry allowed policy makers a relatively free hand, constrained more by interagency rivalries than by popular scrutiny. Congress, for its part, was mostly deferential, funding requests with minimal debate. The result was a permissive environment in which executive branch officials could experiment with tools of influence, laying groundwork that would be exploited more aggressively as the 1950s approached.

By the end of 1949, the hemisphere’s political weather was unsettled. Reformist governments in Guatemala and Bolivia faced entrenched opposition, both domestic and foreign. Right-wing factions in several countries were watching Washington for signals, calculating whether anti-communism could be traded for support. Meanwhile, leftist movements were organizing, aware that the global balance of power might offer them leverage. In this volatile mix, the United States was no neutral referee. Its economic weight, intelligence reach, and security doctrines were already tilting the board, even if the full implications were not yet visible. The stage was set not for a single drama but for a series of experiments in power.

As the 1940s closed, the notion that Latin America was a backyard implied care, but also control. The caretaker would decide which plants thrived and which were weeds. Officials spoke of partnership and progress, but their tools included surveillance, conditionality, and the quiet marshaling of resources. The coming years would test how far these tools could stretch, and how much resistance they would meet. For now, the region remained a landscape of possibility, where reform and repression, cooperation and coercion, could still appear as choices rather than inevitabilities. That ambiguity would not last long.

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