

Season 26

Debating the 2025-2026 Stoa Policy Resolution

The United States Federal Government should substantially reform its policy toward one or more countries in Central/South America.

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History & Background



Stoa 2025-2026 Policy Resolution:

Resolved: The United States Federal Government should substantially reform its policy toward one or more countries in Central/South America.

Latin America¹ is a region historically of great interest to the United States, but often in fits and spurts. Its concerns may dominate the news for period of time, but then the region drifts into obscurity in the public eye. Many Americans (probably most) are unaware of the large number and scope of direct US military interventions and covert schemes and plots carried out inside the borders of most Central American countries at various times in history.

In this chapter we will define the resolution, then trace some of the highlights of the background events of the topic throughout history. In the upcoming second chapter, we will survey Status Quo issues and proposals for change and debate that are common in the literature today. The next chapter about current issues will discuss possible areas of topical policy change.

¹ "Latin" refers to the origin of the predominant languages of the region, Spanish and Portuguese, having evolved in Western Europe from the Latin language of the Roman Empire.

Defining Key Terms

US Federal Government

This is the typical actor for the majority of policy debate resolutions. Foreign policy is squarely within the role of the federal government, and carried out in a delicate, sometimes tempestuous, balance of power between the President and Congress. Federal courts might occasionally get involved if they are called on to interpret the meaning of a statute passed by Congress and pertaining to foreign policy, or to rule on whether the President or Congress had the constitutional authority to take some questionable action.

Substantially reform

Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary² gives, among others, a definition of "substantial":

- "considerable in quantity : significantly great"

And it defines³ "reform" among others as:

"to put or change into an improved form or condition"

This phrase is sure to conjure up the age-old policy debate struggle over the size of the reform versus the size of its effects.

The size of the reform is measured by the size or scope of the policy in the Status Quo as the denominator of a fraction, with the size of change the Affirmative is making as the numerator. A foreign aid policy towards a topical country that currently sends \$1 million/day in aid, if it were cut by \$10,000/day, would only be experiencing a 1% change in policy (10,000 / 1 million).

The AFF, however, might argue that this 1% change would reap massive benefits ("considerable in quantity"), and thus its effects make it topical. Classical debate theory would disagree with this analysis, arguing that the plan should be looked at "in a vacuum," that is, examining only the plan text itself as to whether the words of the plan meet the words of the resolution. We don't care what the effects are until we determine first whether the plan is topical. To do otherwise would make the plan's topicality dependent on its solvency, since if it doesn't achieve the benefits, it's also not a "substantial" reform. And we shouldn't be wasting time debating solvency if the plan wasn't topical in the first place.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantial>

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reform>

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Many of these are small countries we're looking at in the resolution. The policies open to change are not going to have the trillion dollar impacts of global trade or the nuclear impacts of policies with Russia and China. They're going to be seemingly small in scope compared to past topics.

The word "reform" is usually self-explanatory and not too controversial, unless the Affirmative is proposing adding more funding to an existing program. Negatives can certainly argue that doing more of the Status Quo is at best a "minor repair," rather than a significant reform. However, another topicality argument surrounding reform is the potential difference between "reform" and "abolish." Is a policy "reformed" by abolishing it?

Policy

Policy is "a high-level overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body."⁴

The resolution, interestingly, doesn't refer to "foreign" policy, but it does imply that the policy has to somehow directly interact with a foreign country. Examples of such policies might include:

- Military basing overseas
- Military attacks / declaration of war
- Economic and humanitarian aid
- Military aid
- Arms sales
- Trade agreements
- Trade sanctions
- Targeted sanctions against specific named foreign leaders or offenders
- Covert operations attempting to change, influence or overthrow a foreign government
- Signing and ratifying treaties
- Immigration and asylum policies for individuals from specific countries

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/policy>

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Which countries?

The resolution unfortunately failed to define the exact countries, simply leaving it as “Central/South America.” This will result in wasted debate time and effort about whether or not certain countries are topical. For example:

- Some definitions of “Central America” specifically rule out Mexico (labeling it part of “North” America), while others say it’s included in Central America.
- Some Caribbean islands are right off the northern coast of South America (e.g. Grenada, Trinidad). Close enough?
- Some definitions include some Caribbean countries nowhere near the Central/South American mainland as being in Central America. For example, one definition includes Jamaica.
- If the nearby islands are topical, the Netherlands owns Aruba and Curacao right off the coast of Venezuela. Does this mean the Netherlands is now topical? Does British ownership of the Falkland Islands mean the UK is a “country in South America”?
- On the mainland of South America is the territory of French Guiana. It’s a part of France just like Alaska is a part of the USA, even though it’s disconnected from the rest of the homeland. France is therefore a “country in South America,” it would appear.

Be on the lookout for plans that claim advantages from a larger plan that includes Central/South American countries plus others.

Be aware of a term commonly used in the literature: the “Northern Triangle.” It simply refers to the three adjacent countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Regional Background Observations

Most of the countries in the resolution⁵ were formerly colonies of Spain, originally founded in the 16th century by conquistadors who conquered the region for God, glory and gold, not necessarily in that order. Most people know that Spanish is the most common language in most of these countries, but most do not know that the influence of 16th century Spain went far beyond

⁵ Exceptions are: Belize, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and Brazil

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language. It built their economic, political and social structures with effects still happening on the ground today. The conquistadors cast a long shadow.

The region was not empty when the Spanish arrived in the early 1500's; there were many thousands of native inhabitants already there. In the early days of colonization, Spanish explorers often landed on the shore with boats carrying only men.⁶ They would, of necessity, be expected to intermarry with the native women. The results are visible today in the large percentage of the population of these countries known as "Mestizo," or mixed ancestry of Spanish and Indian. There do, however, remain to this day some indigenous groups that continue to use their own languages and maintain their separate identity as best they can. They sometimes still today face mistreatment and marginalization, even as American Indians have in this country historically.

But there were two other aspects of Spanish colonization that stand out as part of the explanation for conditions in these countries today. First, the mindset of the leaders of Spanish expeditions to the New World. The colonists of the Mayflower deliberated and wrote up a plan for how they would organize themselves once they settled permanently in America. But many of the Spanish who went to the New World did so to grab as much gold and glory as they could and then return to Spain as rich men to settle down to a life of ease. This gave them the mindset, not of founding a peaceful and prosperous settlement (like the English in Virginia or Massachusetts) but to exploit the native people and resources to the greatest extent possible, grab as much of the wealth as they could, and then leave. The long-term future of the colony was not their concern. Its people, fruits, land and minerals were just resources to be exploited.

When the Spanish did settle, what kind of society did they establish? The English settlers brought with them traditions involving human rights, English common law, and representative government. The result was a country with a certain set of values and freedoms that allowed individuals to go about the "pursuit of happiness" in a free marketplace. When they perceived the English crown to be infringing on those traditions, they revolted and established a country that would respect them.

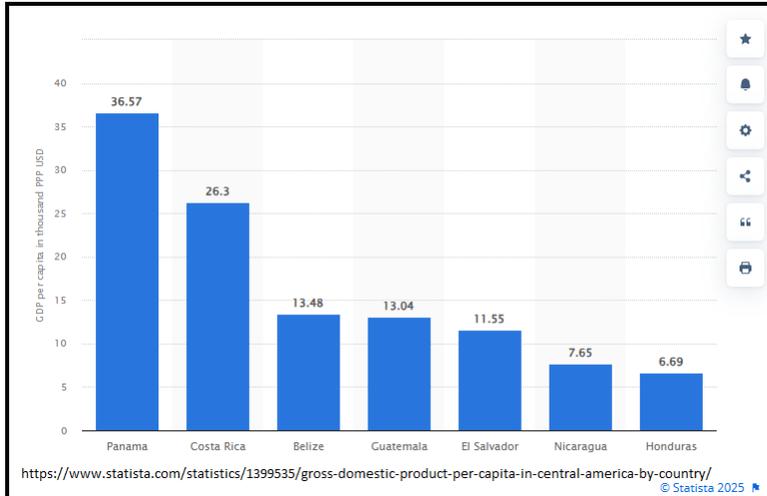
Not so the Spanish. Sixteenth century Spanish colonizers brought with them the remnants of the feudalistic society still prevalent in the home country. It was a society ruled from the top down, not only by a monarchy (which England also had) but by the obligations and rights created by

⁶ English settlers did the opposite in North America: they brought women with them and discouraged intermarriage with the Indians.

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the hierarchy of large landowners ruling over the peasants who were obligated to provide their lord landowner with their labor. Individual initiative, freedom to start new enterprises, compete in the marketplace, make one's own way in the world – these were not part of the culture as they were in English North America. The Indian and Mestizo peasants did whatever their landowner told them to do, and bad things would happen if they didn't. And there would not be any representative government to appeal to for social change.

The effects were long-lasting and persist today. It is not a coincidence that Belize (a former



British, not Spanish) colony and Costa Rica (which, as we will see below, did not follow the feudal social model above) have a higher per capita GDP than the other nations of Central America, except for Panama. It is also not a coincidence that Belize and Costa Rica have a tradition of stable democratically-elected governments.

And this instability and frequent

resort to violence for social change may also derive from the constraints noted above in the Spanish heritage. The poor and oppressed cannot change things through peaceful means, and they see no possibility of advancement. The wealthy and powerful control most of the resources and have no desire for anything to change, since it is profitable for them. The poor see violence and armed struggle as the only means, and socialism/communism as the only alternative ideology that can reform the semi-feudal system that has oppressed them.⁷ The rich see violence as the only way to maintain social order and the United States as an ideological ally in the mutual disdain of socialism.

Conflict is thus inevitable. If free elections are held, and do not produce an outcome to the liking of the rich, a backlash and a coup may take place, to reinstall a more conservative government in the name of opposing communism. If elections are held and do not produce an outcome to the liking of the poor, the reformers, the socialists, or other angry leftists may start a revolution or a guerilla movement – because they now see violence as the only way to bring

⁷ One could suggest that at some point they try capitalism, but many falsely believe that the system they have now is capitalism, since it involves big business and private property.

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about reform, if elections don't bring it. Stir in arms and funding (and sometimes direct military intervention) from the United States to oppose socialist revolution and drug money to whoever can control the drug trade and weapons or funding from socialist countries interested in fomenting revolutions among like-minded comrades in the region, and the pot will always be boiling.

Belize

Belize was the only British colony in Central America, and formerly known as British Honduras. It achieved independence much later than all the others, in 1981.

Its people consist of Creole (African/British), Mestizo (Indian/Spanish), native Indian groups, a number of settlements of North American Mennonites, and refugees from Guatemalan civil war in the 1980's and '90's.

Belize has a stable, democratically-elected government with market economy, mostly focused on agriculture, and has a small oil industry. Issues currently affecting their society include a high rate of violent crime and gangs, high foreign debt, government corruption and widespread poverty.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica was an exception to the usual Spanish colonial social model in Central America.

“The absence of precious metals meant the collection of few taxes ... Compared with other colonies, Costa Rica lacked the large labour force so essential in the Spanish scheme of conquest. The Indigenous population drastically declined during and immediately following conquest; any survivors resisted capture by disappearing into the forests rather than succumbing to the encomienda, Spain's usual system of forced labour. Lacking products for a great overseas market, the Costa Ricans eked out a subsistence economy based on cacao (the source of cocoa beans) and tobacco. Hence, most people were small landowners with a close personal interest in local affairs. Historians often give credit to these developments for the growth of the democratic ideals that have become associated with Costa Rica.”⁸

Costa Rica has a stable, democratically-elected government. Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948 to prevent it from getting involved in politics. It has a higher per capita GDP than its Hispanic heritage neighbors, largely because of the different social model implemented at its founding, as described in the paragraph above.

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Costa-Rica>

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Costa Rica also has another important historical event that is not as well known.

“Costa Rica sought to link the Valle Central with the seaports by railway. The chief promoter of this project was an American, Minor C. Keith, who made a fortune with the opening of his rail line between Cartago and Limón. With vast land grants, Keith then entered the banana business. By the late 19th century bananas were beginning to rival coffee as the chief source of Costa Rican foreign exchange, especially after Keith’s investments were merged with others to form the United Fruit Company in 1899.”⁹

By 1954, the network of connections had grown so extensive it was hard to tell where the government ended and the company began. John Moors Cabot, the American assistant secretary of state in charge of Guatemala, was the brother of Thomas Cabot, who had been the president of United Fruit. John Foster Dulles, who represented United Fruit while he was a law partner at Sullivan & Cromwell—he negotiated that crucial U.F. deal with Guatemalan officials in the 1930s—was secretary of state under Eisenhower; his brother Allen, who did legal work for the company and sat on its board of directors, was the head of the CIA under Eisenhower; Henry Cabot Lodge, who was America’s ambassador to the UN, was a large owner of United Fruit stock; Ed Whitman, the United Fruit PR man, was married to Ann Whitman, Dwight Eisenhower’s personal secretary. You could not see these connections until you could—then you could not stop seeing them.

Where did the interest of United Fruit end and the interest of the United States begin? It was impossible to tell.

Rich Cohen - THE FISH THAT ATE THE WHALE, 2013

The founding of United Fruit had seismic implications for the region. The company became a very profitable business and a very large landowner affiliated with the landowning elites in the Central American countries where it operated. It became a major employer in the region. And it not only allied itself with the local ruling classes, but it also built connections in Washington. Those connections probably had a lot to do with American policy in Latin America, as we will soon see.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Costa-Rica>

Guatemala

After independence from Spain in 1821, Guatemala had a long history of authoritarian or military rule until 1945, when its first elections were held. The United Fruit Co. played a big role in the economy and the politics of the nation, but their plans were upset when the elected government began enacting land redistribution policies to alleviate poverty at the expense of the ruling class.

Pres. Dwight Eisenhower authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to organize a military coup to put power back into the hands of the landed elites. The coup was successful and the land reforms were canceled.

Despite the violent and illegal manner by which Castillo's government came to power, Washington promptly recognized it and showered it with foreign aid. Castillo lost no time in repaying his sponsors. He quickly outlawed more than five hundred trade unions and returned more than 1.5 million acres to United Fruit and the country's other big landowners. Guatemala's brief experiment with democracy was over. For the next four decades, its people suffered from government terror without equal in the modern history of Latin America. As one American observer described it,

In Guatemala City, unlicensed vans full of heavily armed men pull to a stop and in broad daylight kidnap another death squad victim. Mutilated bodies are dropped from helicopters on crowded stadiums to keep the population terrified . . . those who dare ask about 'disappeared' loved ones have their tongues cut out.

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/jacobo-arbenz-guzman-deposed/>

Backlash was inevitable, and in 1960 a civil war started. Leftists angry about the violent overthrow of their government began a guerilla campaign that lasted for 36 years. The US deployed Green Berets in 1966 to assist the government in the fight for its life. The government resorted to more repressive measures to combat the opposition. Elections were called and then canceled, and the government was taken over by coups at various times, all as the leftist guerilla movement continued its armed struggle. Pres. Jimmy Carter cut off military aid to the Guatemalan government in 1977 in protest of its human rights abuses, and in 1983 Pres. Ronald Reagan reduced its economic aid for the same reason.

In 1985, democratic elections were finally held and US aid was restored, but the leftist rebel movement continued. In 1990, US military aid was once again suspended over human rights concerns. And finally, in 1996, a negotiated settlement ended the civil war, but not before 200,000 deaths had occurred in a country that at that time had only 10.5 million people (about 2% of the population).

Honduras

The phrase “Banana Republic” was first used to refer to Honduras. Its history is similar to Guatemala’s, with similar ethnic composition and similar political history. It has endured similar unexpected changes in government, the overthrow of elected leaders in favor of a military regime (1963), and corruption in government. Much of its history was shaped by the presence and influence of the United Fruit Co., whose interests intersected with those of the US government.

The United States landed troops for military intervention in Honduras in: 1903, 1905, 1907, 1911, 1912, 1919, 1924, 1925. And US troops have been stationed there from 1983 to the present at Soto Cano Air Base, a joint Army/Air Force facility, the

largest US military base in Central America. The U.S. also used Honduras as the staging grounds for the 1954 coup in Guatemala, and as a base of operations for support of the Contras fighting in Nicaragua in the 1980’s (more details below in the Nicaragua section).

In addition to military operations, the U.S. has also involved Honduras in its perpetual “War on Drugs,” since the region is a known pathway for illegal narcotics destined for American users. Similar to Guatemala, the US has supported conservative governments, even repressive ones, in

order to prevent a takeover by any form of government hostile to US interests.

**"The same critics who say that the United State has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say we are always intervening and the yanquis need to get out of Latin America. You can't have it both ways."
- Pres. Barack Obama 2009**

In 2009, a military coup overthrew the government of elected leftist President Manuel

Zelaya. Many on the left, who normally criticize US military intervention in Latin America, suddenly favored it for the purpose of reinstating Zelaya. Pres. Obama opposed the coup but did not carry out any intervention, instead cutting US military and economic aid to Honduras in protest. Violent government crackdowns followed against the inevitable protests against the coup.

(1911) The U.S. president, William Howard Taft, sent marines to protect American banana investments ... three companies ... made large capital outlays in the form of improved port facilities, railroads, workers' settlements, and similar developments. The involvement in Honduran affairs by these companies shaped the prototype for what American writer O. Henry labeled a “banana republic,” that is, a country that has an economy dependent solely on revenue from exporting a single product or commodity, which allows foreign-owned companies to act as its de facto rulers.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Honduras>

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Democracy was restored later in 2009, and Honduras has had a succession of democratically-elected leaders ever since.

The U.S. had substantial cooperation with Honduras in the “War on Drugs” with their President Juan Orlando Hernandez (a.k.a. “JOH”) during his term in office from 2014-2022. However, his political career and reputation as a fighter of the drug war came to an inglorious end when he was extradited to the US in 2022 and convicted of dealing narcotics in 2024 in US federal court. While accepting US foreign aid to fight drugs, he was himself in charge of a large drug smuggling operation that moved 400 tons of cocaine through his country into the U.S. He is currently serving a 45-year sentence in federal prison.

Honduras’ current president is Xiomara Castro, who also happens to be the wife of deposed former President Zelaya. She has canceled any further extradition of wanted criminals from Honduras to the United States and also canceled further cooperation with the US in the War on Drugs.

El Salvador

Like the other former Spanish colonies in the region, El Salvador achieved independence from Spain in the 1820’s. And in similar fashion, it inherited a social model of large landowners running the country, dispossessing those at the bottom (the Indians, for example).

The agricultural practice changed from a variety of crops to feed and clothe the native people (an Indian group known as “Pipils”) to a “cash crop” model producing just a couple of crops (like coffee and sugar cane) for export. This model quite literally is “betting the farm” on global markets for these exported goods. Profits for owners and jobs for workers will be plentiful when their prices are booming, but economic disaster follows quickly when the inevitable bust follows the boom. And without subsistence crops to fall back on, those at the bottom find themselves in dire straits. Social conflict is inevitable as the poor see their well-being not determined by how hard they work but by the decisions of the land-owning elites or by global commodity markets over which they have no control.

The 1920s ignited such a conflict when the global price of coffee declined substantially. By 1932 violence was breaking out into a peasant uprising, in which 30,000 people were killed (4% of the nation’s population at the time). Backlash from the government and a series of military dictatorships followed between the 1930’s – 1960’s. The US government provided foreign aid, but class conflict and widespread poverty persisted.

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By the 1970's, an organized armed leftist resistance movement, the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation, or FMLN, began its uprising and full scale civil war broke out in 1979. The US provided military aid to the Salvadoran government to fight the FMLN, and over a million Salvadorans fled the country. The war continued into the 1980's as terrorism by the FMLN and backlash from the government and its allied "death squads" burned through \$1 million per day in US military aid.

In 1992 a peace settlement was finally reached, in which FMLN became a peaceful major political party and the government scaled back the size and power of its armed forces, even purging officers accused of human rights abuses. Elections since then have brought both conservative and FMLN parties to power at different times.

The current president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele hails from a new independent party outside the traditional conservative / FMLN dichotomy. He has taken strong measures to combat gang violence and a homicide rate that at one time was the highest in the world. Salvadoran prisons are now full (overflowing and overcrowded, even) of convicted, suspected, or wannabe gang members, or men who look like gang members. His measures have brought a dramatic drop in violence, but, some say, at the cost of resurrecting concerns about police/military repression and denial of human rights, as in the bad old days of the 1980's.

Bukele has also taken on the role of being the outsourcing agent for some of Pres. Donald Trump's "tough on illegal immigration" deportation policies. El Salvador has accepted into its prisons numerous Venezuelans detained in and deported from the U.S. for immigration violations under Trump's controversial policy.

In addition to these concerns, El Salvador struggles with a high level of national debt. El Salvador cannot inflate away its debt (print money to pay off its loans) because, since 2001, the US dollar has been the official currency. Pres. Bukele took the interesting step recently of declaring Bitcoin as an alternative official currency in addition to the dollar.

Bukele appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for new loans to pay off the old loans that were coming due and putting the Salvadoran government at risk of default. IMF has approved the new lending with these comments:

"Following the Executive Board's discussion on El Salvador, Mr. Nigel Clarke, Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair, issued the following statement: 'The Salvadorean economy is steadily expanding on the back of robust remittances and tourism, and a greatly improved security situation. External deficits have narrowed, inflation has fallen, and recent liability management operations have reduced near-term financing needs.

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Nevertheless, El Salvador continues to face deep macroeconomic imbalances, stemming from high debt and weak external and financial buffers, as well as barriers to investment and productivity.’ ”¹⁰

Nicaragua

Post independence in the 1820's, Nicaragua found itself unstable, divided among conflicting groups and ideologies, and descended into civil war. During times of relative peace, Nicaragua attracted the attention of US citizens because it was the most convenient transit point between the East Coast and California, which became especially important during the 1849 gold rush. Ideas were floated of possibly building a canal through Nicaragua, but these were ultimately abandoned in favor of Panama.



The outbreak of further internal conflict in 1909, in which some American citizens were killed, brought US military intervention. US forces were sent in by Pres. Taft in 1912 and occupied Nicaragua almost continually until 1933. During the latter part of this period, a rebel movement led by Augusto Sandino carried out a guerilla war against both the Nicaraguan government and the US Marines stationed there. American forces installed the



Somoza family in power during the occupation, and they ruled Nicaragua either directly or through proxies loyal to them from 1927 to 1979. The Somoza family not only ran the government, they also owned many critical sectors of the economy.

In 1972, a powerful earthquake hit the capital, Managua, and destroyed 90% of the city. Foreign aid flowed into the country to aid the rebuilding

efforts, but the Somoza regime siphoned off large amounts of it into their own pockets.

Simmering discontent against the authoritarian and corrupt government boiled over into armed rebellion with the rise of a leftist guerilla movement known as the Sandinistas (in honor of Augusto Sandino).

Allied with and receiving aid from the communist regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba, the Sandinista movement overthrew the US-backed Somoza regime in 1979. The Sandinistas began aiding

¹⁰ IMF Feb. 2025 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2025/02/26/pr25043-el-salvador-imf-approves-new-40-month-us1-bn-eff-arr>

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other leftist rebel movements (e.g. the FMLN in El Salvador) and began their own system of repression. Keeping in mind the Cold War tensions between the democratic/capitalist West and the communist bloc in the East, the emergence of a second socialist country like Cuba so close to American shores was alarming to US policymakers. Pres. Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980 and well known for his dedication to opposing communism, promoted active efforts to undo the Sandinista revolution and roll back the influence of its ideology in Central America. One Cuba in Latin America was more than enough.

Declaring Nicaragua a national security threat, Pres. Reagan authorized the CIA to support a guerilla group in Nicaragua known as the “Contras,” dedicated to doing exactly what the Sandinistas had just done, in reverse. The conflict produced another decade of violence, sabotage and backlash throughout the country. In 1984, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was elected President of Nicaragua and began social reforms that moved the country in the direction of his Marxist ideology. More on him later.

Meanwhile, Congress became disillusioned with the tactics of the Contras, disappointed at their lack of results, and embarrassed for the US to be associated with their activities. In 1985, Congress enacted the “Boland Amendment,” which banned any further congressional funds being used for the Contras. Some senior Reagan administration leaders and advisors, still worried about the national security threat they believed Nicaragua posed, devised a scheme to continue funding the Contras covertly and bypass the congressional restrictions. It became known as the “Iran/Contra” scandal, when news broke that agents of the US government had sold weapons to arch-enemy Iran in exchange for freeing some hostages held by Iran’s proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, and then used the funds from the sale to aid the Contras.

Ultimately the Contras were able to put enough pressure on the Sandinista regime that they were forced to hold elections in 1990, which were won by anti-Sandinista candidate Violeta Chamorro. Nicaragua held elections in subsequent years until in 2006, surprise, Daniel Ortega won the presidency again and learned his lesson: Never give up power once you have obtained it. He has ruled Nicaragua ever since, and has been widely criticized for his repressive measures, violations of civil rights, tampering with elections, silencing of opposition candidates and parties, to the point that many now doubt that Nicaragua can still be called a democracy. The U.S. has imposed trade sanctions on Nicaragua in response.

Panama

The nation of Panama is an artificial creation resulting from US efforts to build a canal across the Central American isthmus in the early 20th century. The territory we know today as Panama was part of the nation of Colombia until 1903, when a US-sponsored revolution created the independent nation in order to accept US terms for building the canal.



1904-1914 Panama Canal

“...In 1901, the United States negotiated with Britain for the support of an American-controlled canal that would be constructed either in Nicaragua or through a strip of land—Panama—owned by Colombia. In a flourish of closed-door maneuvers, the Senate approved a route through Panama, contingent upon Colombian approval. When Colombia balked at the terms of the agreement, the United States supported a Panamanian revolution with money and a naval blockade... This project also converted the Panama Canal Zone into a major staging area for American military forces, making the United States the dominant military power in Central America.”
— Prof. Sidney Milkis



At the time, the strategic and economic significance of the Panama Canal could hardly be overstated. The first alternative to the canal was to sail to Nicaragua, offload people or cargo to be transported by land to the Pacific coast, then load everything onto another ship for further travel. The second alternative was to sail all the way around the southern end of South America, adding lengthy delay and expense to the voyage. For a country growing in world military importance (as demonstrated by the recent Spanish-American war in 1898), having a maritime passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans was considered a vital national security issue for the US Navy (and it still is today).

The US federal government paid for the cost of building the Panama Canal, and it cost not only the taxpayers but the workers who toiled there very dearly. But as the decades passed, feelings of resentment built up at the presence of a U.S.-owned strip of territory in the middle of their country (the “Panama Canal Zone”) and foreign ownership of the most valuable asset the nation of Panama had. It became a symbol of what some considered US imperialism, and pressure built for some kind of resolution to devolve ownership of the canal and its surrounding land back to Panama.

Negotiations over a Canal Treaty began in the 1960s and were finally concluded in 1977, under Pres. Jimmy Carter. The US Senate, after a great deal of controversy, ratified the treaty in 1978 and, under the terms of the treaty, the Canal was handed over to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999. The

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger set forth his reasoning in a meeting with President Ford in 1975: “If these [Canal] negotiations fail, we will be beaten to death in every international forum and there will be riots all over Latin America.”





US President Jimmy Carter and Panama President Omar Torrijos at the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty, 1977

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/panama-canal>

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treaty allows the U.S. the right to intervene with military force to keep the Canal open in case of any threats.

But the story of the US relationship with Panama, unfortunately, didn't end there. Friction between the US and Panama grew after the death of Torrijos in 1981 and the arrival of Panamanian leader Gen. Manuel Noriega, who was accused of corruption and drug dealing. Pres. George H. W. Bush ordered a military invasion of Panama in December 1989, to overthrow Noriega and install a new government.

The US dollar is used as currency in Panama. With revenue from the Canal supporting their economy, Panama has the highest per capita GDP of any country in Central America.

Mexico

Some definitions of "Central America" rule out Mexico, while others include it. We cover it here, since debaters tend to want to use the most expansive definitions of policy resolutions.

Mexico has had a rocky relationship with the U.S. since its independence from Spain in 1821. The war between the US and Mexico (1846-1848) took almost 1/2 of the total area of Mexico at the time away from our southern neighbor and provided the land for several southwestern US states, at the cost of over 30,000 American lives. Mexico still has a vast land area and is the 10th highest populated country in the world.

The 19th century saw various revolutions, foreign interventions (besides the war with the U.S.), civil war, and instability. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) created a new constitution, still in effect today. One political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) dominated (with the help of some electoral fraud and some heavy handed crackdown by government forces) Mexican politics until 2000, when a challenger won the Presidency for the first time.

Mexico joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and the U.S. in the 1990's, a move whose merits are still debated to this day. Unhappy with NAFTA, Pres. Donald Trump during his first presidential term renegotiated NAFTA with some minor changes into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Although Mexico has undergone substantial economic development since the Mexican Revolution, it remains significantly poorer than the U.S. It's per capita GDP is about 1/6 of the U.S., just slightly higher than Costa Rica and substantially higher than the rest of Central America, except Panama. Relative wealth has a great deal of impact on motivation for migration. For example, hardly any Canadian citizens sneak across the border or try to enter the

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US illegally. They would have little to gain, since the standard of living in Canada is similar to that of our country.

With the great disparity between wealth of the average person in Mexico and the U.S., there is a large incentive for the poor in Mexico to seek to enter the US, and many have. And as the disparity to the US is even greater with the citizens of the Northern Triangle, and their proximity to Mexico with a pathway to the US border, they have an even greater incentive to migrate north.

The Mexican government often takes the brunt of criticism from the U.S. government with regard to what it is doing (or not doing) to stem the tide of illegal immigration at the US border, whether of its own citizens or others. During Pres. Trump's first term, he implemented a "Remain in Mexico" policy requiring that migrants applying for asylum at the US southern border should stay in Mexico until their hearing. This was designed to eliminate the risk that migrants, many of whom actually have no valid claim of persecution that would justify a legal asylum claim, will simply abscond into the interior of the U.S. once they file their (possibly hopeless) claim. The policy ended during the Biden administration and the government of Mexico declared they would no longer participate in it.

During his second term, Pres. Trump has expressed concern not only about illegal immigration coming from Mexico but also the flow of illegal drugs like fentanyl and the activities of dangerous criminal gangs near the border. In February 2025, he imposed high tariffs on trade with Mexico (among other countries) to pressure their government to do more to combat these threats.

Venezuela

Venezuela's economy is driven (both up and down) by petroleum. It has the largest known oil deposits of any country in the world - even greater than Saudi Arabia. When oil prices rise, money flows in and the country is enriched. When oil prices fall, their economy flounders.

Venezuela has a history of unstable governments, military dictators and crisis. It experienced a generation of prosperity and democratically elected governments from the late 1950's to the 1980s, and had the best per capita standard of living in South America at that time. But sole reliance on oil for prosperity, along with colossal governmental mismanagement, took them down as fast as they had gone up. Today, it is the poorest country in per capita income in South America.

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Falling oil prices led to political instability. In 1992, army officer Hugo Chavez unsuccessfully attempted a coup to overthrow the government. In 1998, he ran as a candidate in the presidential elections and won, receiving a mandate from the voters to implement his socialist vision for redistribution of the country's oil revenue to the greater benefit of the poor.

Rising oil prices, for a while, supported his socialist program. New social welfare programs were implemented, doctors from socialist ally Cuba were brought in to provide free medical care, and Chavez was re-elected in 2000, 2006 and 2012. Chavez nationalized key industries and had the government run large sectors of the economy, including the oil industry.

Unfortunately, as had already been tried and failed in other nations, centralized government planning and ownership of the economy proved to be inefficient and unsustainable. Funding for social programs ran out as global oil prices fell again and production of oil declined due to the government's incompetence at running what was once a profitable private industry. The government resorted to printing money to pay for the things oil once paid for, with the inevitable result of hyperinflation and economic collapse.

Chavez died of cancer in 2013 and was succeeded by Nicolas Maduro, who, thanks to rigged elections and violent repression, remains in office today. Maduro insists on continuing the socialist policies of Chavez, and the results have been arguably disastrous. Millions of Venezuelans have fled the country to escape poverty and repression. Since 2006, the US government has imposed economic sanctions on Venezuela as well as targeted sanctions on leaders in the Venezuelan government.

Colombia

Colombia endured a substantial period of instability and internal conflict following independence from Spain in the early 1800's. In the 1960's, armed conflict spread among a leftist guerilla movement (FARC), government military forces, right-wing paramilitaries, and drug cartels. The U.S. provided military aid against FARC and the drug trade through a program known as "Plan Colombia."

In 2016, the Colombian government and FARC reached a settlement that has largely, though not completely, brought a measure of peace to the country following 52 years of conflict and the loss of a quarter million lives. The country is still sorting through the aftermath of trying to resolve accountability for crimes committed on both sides of the conflict, without reopening the wounds and restarting the war.

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Unfortunately, Colombia remains a dangerous place due to ongoing threats from armed groups, terrorism, kidnapping and crime. Poverty motivates some to participate in drug crop cultivation and drug trade, as legitimate employment opportunities are either unavailable or don't pay well enough. Meanwhile, the drug trade fuels violence and crime that may tend to keep many in poverty. Colombia's per capita GDP at \$6,900 is poor.

Colombia faces massive challenges with refugees, both internally displaced by its own conflicts and those fleeing from the crisis across the border in Venezuela. The U.S. was providing substantial foreign aid to Colombia to deal with these problems, but that aid is now being cut under the second Trump administration.

Ecuador

Ecuador, like Venezuela, depends (over-depend?) on oil to drive its economy. And like other countries in the region, it has had a turbulent past with deep and sometimes violent social divisions between left and right.

In the 1940s and 1950s, exports of agricultural products, particularly bananas, grew Ecuador's economy and raised hopes that some measure of social and political stability had been achieved. Those hopes were dashed in 1963 when the army overthrew (some believe, with the help of the U.S. CIA) the constitutional President, out of fear that he was sympathetic to Cuban style communism.

Democratically elected governance was restored in 1979, accompanied by substantial economic development fueled by increasing production and higher prices of petroleum, as the Ecuadoran economy transitioned from its reliance on agriculture. But reliance on oil, as we saw above, carries its own dangers, and those were realized when the price of oil declined and economic hardship ensued. Ecuador adopted the US dollar as its currency in 2000, which has helped it avoid previously recurring economic shocks from high inflation caused by the Ecuadoran central bank excessively printing money.

In 2009, Ecuador's government turned to the left and leaned toward alliance with the socialist regime of Chavez in Venezuela. More recently, however, in 2018, they have changed course and returned to a more friendly stance toward the United States.

Bolivia

Like other South American countries, Bolivia has gone through its share of political instability, military governments, and violence. The United States backed a military coup in 1971 to overthrow the socialist government of its existing military leader. The new government went on to commit human rights abuses in its efforts to stamp out the movement toward socialism and prevent alignment with Cuba and its communist allies.

Bolivia transitioned back to democracy in the 1990s. The leading political figure of Bolivian politics in the last generation has been leftist leader Evo Morales, from the Movement for Socialism party, who won his first presidential term in 2005. His rule saw substantial economic growth, and he was highly popular. However, he and legislators loyal to him moved for changes to (or a way to simply bypass) constitutional limits on presidential terms, so that Morales could get re-elected multiple times. Forced to resign amidst charges of election fraud in 2019, Morales is attempting a political comeback by running in the elections coming up soon (at the time of this writing) in August 2025. And, in a throwback to its bad old days, Bolivia's military attempted a coup in June 2024, which was unsuccessful.

Bolivia has large reserves of natural gas as well as rich mineral resources, which form a substantial part of its economy. Bolivia has a massive deposit of lithium, a mineral growing in importance for the "clean energy" economy.

Argentina

Following independence from Spain in the 1820s and internal conflict until 1880, Argentina's population and economy grew, driven by large scale immigration from Europe (similar to the USA at the time), an influx of foreign investment, and successful development of their agricultural sector. The government was run by various competing democratically elected parties and the country had a high and modern standard of living until the Great Depression sank the world economy in 1930. Argentina never fully regained the economic growth trajectory it was on, due to government instability and mismanagement. Argentina's government has defaulted on its national debt nine times since the country's independence from Spain (most recently in 2020) and has a habit of resorting to printing money for government expenses when times are tough.

Social unrest and the depressed economy led to a military coup that year and conservative military leaders ran the country under the cover of fraudulent elections for over a decade. In 1946, free elections were held and probably the country's most influential leader of the 20th century, General Juan Peron, was elected.¹¹

Peronism, as his style of governance was known, consisted of many policies of the left (e.g. nationalization of railways and banks, increased power for labor unions) along with suppression of dissent and repression of human rights. A military coup in 1955 overthrew Peron and banned his political movement. A new government was elected in 1958 and then overthrown by the military again in 1962, as a cycle of repression and backlash between Peronists and anti-Peron elements of the military continued.

Violent movements, terrorism and political upheavals continued until 1973, when the exiled Peron returned to once again assume the presidency of Argentina, this time supported by right-wing factions and using emergency powers to suppress violence and opposition. He died in 1974 and was succeeded by his widow, Isabel Peron, who was then removed by yet another military coup in 1976.

The Argentine armed forces ran the country until 1983, during which time the government prosecuted an internal "war" on leftist ideology known as the "Dirty War." Arresting anyone believed to be sympathetic to socialism, communism or other dissenters resulted in the death or

¹¹ His second wife Eva (known colloquially as "Evita") became the subject of a well-known musical show and movie, which is worth seeing if you want to understand more about Argentina's history in the 1940s and '50s. Her attachment to the common people and her death from cancer at age 33 made her a tragic and celebrated figure in popular culture.

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disappearance of tens of thousands of citizens. The military government also made the miscalculated effort of attempting to seize by military force the Falkland Islands from Great Britain in 1982. Defeat in the war with Britain discredited the regime and led to a transition back to civilian democratically elected governance in 1983. Argentina has long laid claim to the Falklands (and still does today), despite the fact that all the people who live there are British people who want to remain under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom.

The current president of Argentina is Javier Milei. He faces challenging economic times, with high rates of poverty and inflation plaguing the country.

Guyana

Guyana, on the northern coast of South America, was a British colony until 1966 and is the only primarily English speaking country on the continent. It had a socialist authoritarian government until free elections were held in 1992.

Guyana is still best remembered as the site of the mass suicide of over 900 members of the People's Temple cult in a jungle camp in 1978.¹² The Jonestown, Guyana, camp where the tragedy occurred was founded as a socialist utopia by Rev. Jim Jones, a charismatic religious leader who had relocated his flock from San Francisco to Guyana to escape from the perceived oppression of American society, government and capitalism.

Guyana's next big thing is oil. The country is mostly jungle and has little else going on. But the discovery in the last 10 years of massive reserves of oil are changing the country's economy. It already has the fourth highest per capita GDP in the Western Hemisphere (after the US, Canada and the Bahamas), although "per capita" is an average that can mask large disparities between the very rich and the very poor.

Guyana has disputes with Venezuela over the delineation of their common border. And there are still concerns about the legitimacy of the outcome of its 2020 election.

¹² Today, the phrase "drink the Kool Aid" refers back to this event. Jones' followers drank a powdered mix soft drink (not Kool Aid brand) laced with poison voluntarily at his command when he believed the commune was under threat from outside forces. "Drink the Kool Aid" colloquially means for the common people to accept and promote whatever the leadership of an organization is saying, without questioning it.

Suriname

Suriname, on the northern coast of South America, was a colony of the Netherlands until 1975. The country was embroiled in coups, chaos, controversy and civil war in the 1980s. Reforms have been underway recently to the election system to bring democracy and legitimacy to its government.

Suriname has a small population but could be a substantial contributor to the economy of the region with resources such as oil, gold and other minerals. It may also become an area of strategic competition between the US and China.

Why Suriname Matters: South America's Overlooked Strategic Geography



The outcome of the likely negotiations to form a government between the parties of a fragmented Surinamese National Assembly following the May 25 election is highly uncertain, but has significant implications for the country, the region, and the United States. Suriname, which receives almost no attention in the U.S. media, is an important emerging petroleum producer and source of strategic minerals, including gold and bauxite; a stronghold of Chinese commercial, cultural, and political presence; a transit country for Europe-bound cocaine; and a hub of illegal mining with a scarcely populated, little controlled, 90 percent jungle-covered interior.

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French Guiana

French Guiana is the only territory on the South American mainland that is still under the sovereignty of a European power. It is not, however, a colony, but a fully equal part of France, just like Alaska is a US state equal to the other 49 states even though it is located remotely from the other states.

FG has a very small population (~300,000) and a large uninhabited jungle and forest region. For a century (1850's to 1950's) it was the home to a notorious prison colony, where convicts from France were exiled and forgotten.¹³ Today, it is the home to the French rocket launching base used for European space launches.

Since FG is an integral part of France, you may or may not want to research US foreign policy toward France because you may or may not be able to change policies toward France if FG makes France a country in South America.

¹³ The book and movies called *Papillon* (French for "butterfly" for a tattoo worn by the main character) are based on a fictionalized account written by a French prisoner there in the 1930s-40s.

Peru

Peru's history in the 19th century following independence from Spain was a litany of border wars, internal civil wars, revolutions, rewritings of constitutions and upheavals too numerous to mention here. Economic hard times in the Great Depression led to military takeover of the government in 1930. Elections were then called but chaos again ensued and society became even more deeply divided between right and left.¹⁴

Post-World War 2, Peru lurched between democracy and military governments. Meanwhile, three threats emerged from the background into the foreground in the 1980's. One was the rise of the cocaine industry, as the land of Peru was ideal for cultivation of the coca plant, and it proved highly profitable to meet heavy illicit demand from the U.S.

It was attractive because of the second threat, which was poverty. Government mismanagement, including massive printing of money, led to hyperinflation that wrecked the economy and impoverished the people.

And that magnified the third threat, which was the rise of the "Shining Path," an armed guerilla movement that embraced a communist vision of social reform. Other rebel movements also emerged, and the government reacted with violent crackdowns. In 2003, a "Truth & Reconciliation Commission" was established to investigate human rights abuses committed during the 1980-2000 conflict period.

Peru today has a democratically elected, though unstable, government. It faces problems of widespread poverty and deep social divisions sometimes breaking out into violent demonstrations.

¹⁴ If not familiar with these terms, research them more fully in other sources. Briefly, the "right" indicates a more conservative outlook, support for the business class and the military. The "left" would support reforms involving rights of workers (as opposed to business owners), redistribution of wealth through social programs, and government ownership of at least some industries.

Chile

Like other Latin American countries, Chile went through periods of democratic government interspersed with dictators and intervention of the military in the political process following independence from Spain. From the 1930's to the 1970's, Chile had elected governments and an economy with a per capita standard of living just under 1/5 of the United States by 1970.

The 1970 election brought to power Salvador Allende, a reform-minded socialist with a program of nationalization of major industries, government regulation of the economy, and alignment with Cuba and other countries under the influence of the Soviet Union and Marxist ideology. His unwise reforms, along with sanctions applied by the U.S. government, led to severe economic downturn and mounting discontent. Sharp social division and unrest led to a movement against Allende and (some say with assistance from the US Central Intelligence Agency) a military overthrow of his government.

Gen. Augusto Pinochet, leader of the military coup, ruled with a strong hand and substantial disrespect for human rights. Thousands of citizens were jailed, tortured or exiled. He reversed Allende's socialist direction and moved the nation towards free markets, with substantial economic growth following.

In 1989, Chile began returning to democracy with new elections that have been consistently held ever since. Chile signed a free trade agreement with the USA that took effect in 2004.

Uruguay

The territory of Uruguay started out as part of Brazil, but eventually broke away and became a buffer between the rival states of Argentina and Brazil. Like other South American countries, Uruguay went through various cycles of democratic elections and military control. It also benefited from large scale immigration from Europe and achieved a good measure of economic growth. In the early 20th century, Uruguay was known as the "Switzerland of the Americas."

That ended when the Depression hit and a revolution changed the government into a dictatorship sympathetic to the fascist ideology of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. New leadership took over in 1938 that took the country in the opposite direction and enacted constitutional reforms that preserved democratically elected governments into the 1960s.

Economic problems in the 1960s led to social unrest, terrorist activity, government crackdowns and suspension of civil rights and political parties. The military finally seized power in 1973 as social unrest and violence spiraled out of control. The military dictatorship imprisoned and

tortured large numbers of opponents until the return to civilian rule in 1985. Since 1985, Uruguay has been ruled by democratically elected governments.

Paraguay

Following independence from Spain in the 1800s, Paraguay was poor and isolated. It was ruled by a dictatorship that, at the time, seemed the most expedient way to hold the country together, given its weakness and its frequent conflict with its neighboring countries. Paraguay found itself at war with all of its neighbors at various times in the 19th century, at great cost to its territorial size and loss of life. Like other Latin American countries, it spent much of this time and into the 20th century with successions of military rulers, changes of government, and civil war. The military remained the power either directly or indirectly in charge of the government.

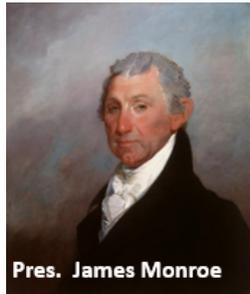
The last military ruler of Paraguay, from 1954-1989, was Gen. Alfredo Stroessner. Under his rule, the economy grew, as did corruption and concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few at the top. Even today, 90% of the land in Paraguay is owned by 5% of the population. Constitutional reforms in the 1990s have led, finally, in 2008 to the first democratic and peaceful transition of power between elected leaders.

The “Tri-Border Area,” where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay meet, is an area of concern due to its lawless character and high influx of immigrants from the Middle East who may have connections to dangerous organizations abroad. Drug trafficking, terrorist fundraising, smuggling and money laundering are all believed to be widespread in the area. The United States is an ally of Paraguay and has military training and cooperation with the Paraguayan military.

Agriculture still forms a large percentage of Paraguay’s economy, which can lead to boom and bust cycles as forces beyond their control (weather, international commodity prices) can change farm income dramatically and unexpectedly.

History of US Policy Toward Latin America

This section can only be a brief overview to give the broad outlines of US policy toward the resolution countries. But it will give some background to help understand how we got to the conditions and policies that we see in the news today, which will be discussed more in the next article about areas of potential policy change.



Pres. James Monroe

Worked because Monroe knew the British Navy would back it up – to avoid losing markets to Spain

MONROE DOCTRINE 1823

“...we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as **dangerous to our peace and safety.** With the existing colonies ...we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence ...we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States”

The foundation of US policy toward Latin America was the proclaimed by Pres. James Monroe in 1823, which came to be known as the “Monroe Doctrine.” It declared that the U.S. found its national security to be directly affected by the well-being of Latin American nations. The U.S. would henceforth oppose any European efforts to colonize, re-colonize, or establish control of any currently independent nations in the

Western Hemisphere. He could make this bold declaration, not because the US Navy was powerful enough to enforce it, but because the British also opposed Spanish intervention in the Western Hemisphere and would take action to protect their trade with independent former Spanish colonies, which might not be allowed if they were to revert to Spanish control.

During the 1800’s, the US landed troops in several Latin American countries to intervene in various disputes, protect business interests, change regimes, promote one side in a local conflict, or retaliate for mistreatment of American citizens. Examples include:

1822,23,24,25 – Cuba

1833,52,53 – Argentina

1846-48 - Mexican War

1853,54,57,67, 94, 99 – Nicaragua

1855,58 – Uruguay

1860, 68,85,95 – Colombia

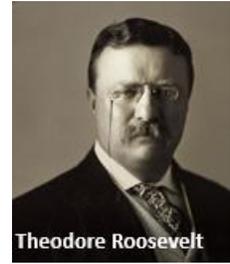
1859 - Paraguay

1856, 73 - Panama

1866, 73-96 – Mexico

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This list is only the 19th century and this may not be an exhaustive list, but you get the idea. This pattern continued into the 20th century with frequent US military landings in the region.



Escalation and/or justification for further US intervention in the region came in 1904 with the declaration of the “Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt declared that the US would act as the policeman of the region, due to its instability, economic problems, and the risk that these would invite European intervention. This declaration and its consequent fulfillment in frequent US intervention provoked resentment. The Latin American nations had not asked anyone in the US for such “help.”

The determination to build a canal to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in Central America was a longstanding dream that Pres. Theodore Roosevelt determined to fulfil. It, too, required US intervention, in this case to foment a revolution in the nation of Colombia.

Building the Panama Canal 1904-1914

“...In 1901, the United States negotiated with Britain for the support of an American-controlled canal that would be constructed either in Nicaragua or through a strip of land—Panama—owned by Colombia. In a flourish of closed-door maneuvers, the Senate approved a route through Panama, contingent upon Colombian approval. When Colombia balked at the terms of the agreement, the United States supported a Panamanian revolution with money and a naval blockade... This project also converted the Panama Canal Zone into a major staging area for American military forces, making the United States the dominant military power in Central America.”

– Prof. Sidney Milkis

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The time period 1898-1934 was a period sometimes referred to as the “Banana Wars.” Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler, a two-time winner of the Medal of Honor, explained it like this in 1935:



Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler

“I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make

Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.”

After World War II ended in 1945, the US began to view Latin America through another lens. Although business interests played a large role, the primary goal of US foreign policy was advancement of the ideological struggle against the Soviet Union known as the “Cold War.” In 1947, the US adopted a foreign policy known as the “Containment Doctrine,” which advocated US economic and military aid to governments (or other actors) opposed to communism. The goal was to prevent the spread of Soviet/communist influence any further in the world beyond the nations that had already adopted it, without declaring or provoking a potentially civilization-ending world war directly with the Soviet Union.

Cuba’s 1959 communist revolution, led by Fidel Castro, was a key event in that struggle and still plays a role in US policy towards Latin America today. A communist nation allied with the Soviet Union just 90 miles off the coast of Florida was considered a major national security threat. Installation of Soviet nuclear missiles there in 1962 provoked a potentially world-ending showdown between the US and the Soviet Union. Though the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved peacefully, it strengthened resolve in US policymakers not to allow the spread of communist ideology any further in Latin America. Cuba and its ally Venezuela influence Latin America by presenting themselves as alternative models of governance for those disaffected with the Status Quo or with US policies. Any Latin American politician can win points with those who dislike American intervention in the region by saying something good about Cuba or Venezuela.

CENTRAL & SOUTH AMERICA: HISTORY & BACKGROUND

As we covered in the specific country sections above, US foreign policy in the 1950s through 1980s in the region involved active intervention to prevent them from drifting into the socialist camp of Cold War adversaries aligned with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, we moved into post-Cold War foreign policy concerns with regard to Central America. Today, the US is likely to oppose a socialist revolution in a Latin American country as much out of fear of its economic collapse and a wave of refugees as out of fear for our national security, although unexpected waves of migration can be viewed in national security terms. These and other concerns will be covered in the next article about current policies and possible ideas for policy change.