Money and Matanzas: The Failure of United States Military Aid in Central America During the Cold War

Introduction

Throughout the Cold War era, the United States government sought to combat the proliferation of communism and the expansion of its geopolitical rival, the Soviet Union. In the 1970s and especially the 1980s, threats to U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere emerged in the form of leftist movements throughout Latin America. According to the zero-sum theory that dictated the success of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, any leftist or communist gain translated into a loss for the United States. As a result, the United States government adopted both preventative and reactionary measures to combat leftist threats throughout Latin America. Such measures were manifested in the form of military aid to conservative right-wing military leaders, with the specific goal to eliminate leftist insurgencies and their civilian support bases. The application of U.S. military aid and the implementation of anti-communist policies led to several consequences, however. Measures taken by the military in recipient countries to eradicate insurgencies and civilian support bases resulted in the fragmentation of civil-military relations; first, U.S. military aid provided military leaders with the leverage to seize control of the state, and institute autonomous dictatorial rule with no regard for democratic government. Second, the methods used to consolidate the state under military rule resulted in numerous human and civil rights violations in each recipient country.
Throughout the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan viewed the strength of leftist insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua as a challenge to the United States’ sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere. In order to maintain its position as “the Western hegemon” the Reagan Administration conceived a plan of assistance for anti-Communist organizations in each of the three countries. Drawing from the counterinsurgency tactics employed by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, President Reagan’s military advisers created a doctrine titled “Low Intensity Conflict” designed to contain communist military activities in certain areas, and to prevent leftist insurgencies from infiltrating other parts of the country.

In order to address the outcome of United States foreign policy to Central America during the Cold War, this paper will examine how the United States government provided the militaries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua with counterinsurgency strategies, military training, logistical support, and/or armaments to combat leftist movements. Further, it will examine the tenets of the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine, which served as the counterinsurgency strategy for anti-communist regimes forces in each country. Next, it will argue that the Low Intensity Conflict Doctrine served the Reagan Administration’s goals in Central America because its vague definition allowed anti-communist establishments to implement military strategies to achieve their own ends under a cloak of legitimacy. Additionally, it will demonstrate the impact of U.S. military aid on civil society in each country. Finally, the paper concludes that although U.S.

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1 In this case, I use the Contra force created by the CIA, which consisted of former Nicaraguan military officers.
military aid provided right-wing leaders in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua with the means to combat leftist advances, it inherently failed to achieve the ultimate goal of the Reagan Administration, which was the elimination of leftist insurgencies and the regional threat of leftist movements in Central America.

**U.S. Military Goals in Latin America**

An analysis of United States foreign policy during the Cold War reveals three primary goals of U.S. military aid to Latin America, which were:

1) Defeat leftist counterinsurgents
2) Eradicate communist support bases in the civilian population
3) Maintain democratic government and secure against future threats to autonomous democratic rule

In order to achieve these goals, the United States government provided both lethal and non-lethal military aid to Latin American militaries during the Cold War. “Lethal aid” is defined as weapons and other combat armaments whereas “non-lethal aid” is defined as funding, training, logistical support, and military advising. Arguably, non-lethal military aid had a greater effect on the civil population of each country; by making these militaries more cohesive, better organized, and corporately focused they became a greater threat to civil society.² The training and logistical support provided by the United States gave the military in each recipient country the tools and resources to carry out state-sponsored terrorism, organized executions, and programs of coercion to consolidate civil society under military rule.

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First, a review of declassified U.S. diplomatic exchanges with the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala reveal U.S. support for counterinsurgency operations, and overt support for anti-communist measures undertaken by the military in each country. Several of these documents are included in the following case studies. Second, in addition to ideological support, the United States also provided extensive logistical and strategic assistance. Latin American military leaders and their personnel received the majority of their training sponsored by the United States at the School of the Americas (SOA) in Fort Benning, Georgia. More than 60,000 members of Latin American militaries have attended the school since its inception in 1946. Originally located in Panama as the U.S. Army Caribbean Training Center, the School of the Americas was renamed in 1963 under the auspices of President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress; the SOA moved to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984 in accord with the Panama Canal Treaties. The SOA focuses primarily on counterinsurgency, infantry tactics, military intelligence, counter-narcotics operations, and commando operations, in addition to mandated human rights and ethics courses. Although its curriculum has changed, critics and opponents of the school charge that the SOA instructed its students in methods of torture, assassination, and psychological operations against civil society in order to eradicate support bases for leftist movements.

These accusations were confirmed when the U.S. Department of Defense issued a press release detailing the results of a 1992 investigation into the curriculum promoting human rights violations at the School of the Americas. On September 20, 1992 the

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4 Ibid.
Pentagon issued a report that acknowledged the use of seven training manuals from 1982-1991 written in Spanish, which advocated the use of executions, torture, coercion and kidnapping. The Pentagon considered the instructions offered in these manuals as “objectionable material.” The objectionable material, including references to "eliminating potential rivals, obtaining information involuntarily, and the neutralization of people,” were taken out of context, according to the Department of Defense. The material is partly based on training instructions used in the 1960s by the Army's Foreign Intelligence Assistance Program, entitled “Project X,” although the Pentagon referred to the manuals as “outdated instructional material without the required doctrinal approval.”

The manual on "Terrorism and the Urban Guerrilla" states:

"Another function of the or CI [counterintelligence] agents is recommending CI targets for neutralizing. The CI targets can include personalities, installations, organizations, documents and materials . . . the personality targets prove to be valuable sources of intelligence. Some examples of these targets are governmental officials, political leaders, and members of the infrastructure.”

In this case, “neutralization” is a euphemism for assassination or destruction, and the SOA promoted the systematic assassination of guerrilla and civilian leaders in order to stymie the progress of insurgencies.

Additionally, the SOA manual Counterintelligence provides guidelines to which leaders should be placed on a blacklist, and what actions should be taken against them.

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According to the manual, the following “contain the identities and locations of persons whose capture and detention are of foremost importance to the armed forces”:\(^9\):

1) Enemy agents known or suspects [sic], persons involved in espionage, sabotage, politics, and subversive persons.
2) Hostile para-military guerilla team leaders, known or suspects.
3) Political leaders known or suspected as hostile toward the Armed Forces or the political interests of the National Government.
4) Known or suspected leaders of enemy governments whose presence in the area of operations represent a threat the [sic] national security.
5) Collaborators & sympathizers of the enemy, or known suspects whose presence in the area of operations represent a threat to the national security.
6) Military and civilian enemies, known or suspected of having participated in intelligence activities, counter-intelligence, security, police, or political indoctrination between the troops or among civilians.
7) Other personalities identified by the G2 as of immediate detention. This could include local political personalities, chiefs of police, and municipal leaders or leaders of the enemy's government departments.\(^10\)

Although the manual provides guidelines as to which members of civil society may be the most threatening to the armed forces, it fails to define the actions of a “known or suspected” leader, or provide guidelines to label a civilian as such. One possible source of the definition of insurgent activities is the section titled “Indicators of Control by the Guerrilla Forces” in the *Combat Intelligence* training manual. This manual defines activities such as “accusations that the government has failed in its responsibility to meet the basic needs of the people” and “accusations of brutality or torture by the police or armed forces”\(^11\) as anti-military activities. In reality, these expressions of dissent are within the civil rights of any individual in a democracy and do not necessarily indicate insurgent behavior, but dissatisfaction with the central government. Including these types of activities in the definition of “suspected or hostile” however, provided the military with even greater means to detain civilians. Thus, military officials had the flexibility to


\(^10\)Ibid.

\(^11\)“Combat Intelligence Training Manual” page 163
identify nearly any individual as a suspect, based on the vague definition provided in the Counterintelligence training manual and the identifying information in the Combat Intelligence training manual. Lastly, although the Department of Defense acknowledges the use of the manuals during the years 1980-1992 when Central American militaries received the majority of U.S. military assistance, this type of training is not limited to the years in question.

Finally, military officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua interpreted the direction to neutralize leaders, detain suspected threats to the state, and eradicate civilian support bases for leftist insurgencies in extremely literal terms. Military governments in each country organized “disappearances” in which civilians were seized from their homes without arrest followed by detention, torture, and/or execution, in addition to state-sponsored death squads, and systematic massacres of civilians, mostly in rural areas. The following case studies illustrate the application of U.S. military aid using these measures, and the subsequent fragmentation of the civil-military relationship in each country.

**United States Military Aid in Central America**

The United States took an active role in the counterinsurgency efforts of Central American militaries. In El Salvador and Guatemala, the United States provided a counterinsurgency strategy, in addition to training and armaments to eradicate rural leftist guerrilla movements. Nicaragua is a unique case in which the United States formed an insurgency to overthrow the leftist Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or the
Sandinista government, which achieved power during a 1979 coup that ousted the military dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. Following the 1979 coup, the Reagan Administration trained former Somoza national guardsmen and military officers and provided them with a strategy to regain control of the Nicaraguan government in order to establish an anti-communist democratic regime. This insurrectionary force was known as the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaraguense*, or the “Contras.”

During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration also provided the militaries of Guatemala and El Salvador, and the Nicaraguan Contras with a counterinsurgency strategy based on “Low Intensity Conflict” or LIC. The LIC doctrine strives to contain communist military activities in certain areas of a country, and prevent counterinsurgents from infiltrating the rest of the population through the application of the following tenets:

1. Emphasis on the need for coordinated defense and development programs
2. Civic action assistance and recognition that socioeconomic conditions increase popular support for leftist political violence
3. Facile description of all leftists involved in political violence as “terrorists” and “criminals”
4. Emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification as a task for foreign armed forces who can rely on U.S. training and aid
5. Eradication of guerrilla support systems

LIC placed emphasis upon what fueled communist insurgents, rather than combating them with their own strategies of ambush and sabotage. Under LIC, civilians were viewed as potential communists, and the containment of insurgent activities in certain areas of the country ensured that the movement would not infiltrate other regions. As a result, civilians rather than guerrillas became the targets of Central American military operations. The LIC doctrine provided criteria for the foundation of anti-communist

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strategies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. LIC did not specifically state the
best methods for the application of its themes; however, it simply provided an overall
view of counterinsurgency theory. As a result, anti-communist military forces in El
Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua had the freedom to decide how they would apply the
doctrine. LIC merely served as a front for military activities that resulted in systematic
rape and torture, massacres, and state coercion.

Guatemala

The Guatemalan civil war lasted from 1960 to 1996 and consisted primarily of a
coalition of leftist, rural, indigenous groups against a string of military dictatorships. The
Guatemalan insurgents formed the umbrella group the Unidad Revolucionario Nacional
Guatemalteco (URNG) or the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity in 1982, the
same year that General Efraín Rios Montt seized control of the government in a military
coup from the outgoing dictator, General Romeo Lucas García. The administrations of
these two military dictators were the most oppressive and brutal during the Guatemalan
civil war.

Following his seizure of the presidency, Rios Montt formed a three-member
military junta that annulled the 1965 constitution, dissolved Congress, suspended political
parties, and cancelled the electoral law. After a few months, he dismissed his junta
colleagues and assumed the de facto title of "President of the Republic."

13 U.S. Department of State “Guatemala Background Notes.” Internet. Available online:
Although the Carter Administration suspended lethal military aid to Guatemala in 1978 due to the brutality and human rights violations of the Lucas García regime, the United States had trained the Guatemalan military, and provided Lucas García and Rios Montt with the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine as a basis for their counterinsurgency methods. Lucas García implemented a counterinsurgency strategy based on LIC titled “Program of Pacification and Eradication of Communism” using U.S. military advisers in conjunction with the Guatemalan army. This plan focused on cities as well as rural areas, and aimed to coerce the population into submission through acts of seemingly random violence against civil society. One statistic cites that 9,000 unarmed civilians were executed by the military in 1981 alone.

Rios Montt's brief presidency was probably the most violent period of the 36-year internal conflict, which resulted in about 200,000 deaths of mostly unarmed indigenous civilians. General Rios Montt was quoted in the New York Times on July 18, 1982 as telling an audience of indigenous Guatemalans, "If you are with us, we'll feed you; if not, we'll kill you." Under the tenets of the LIC doctrine, Rios Montt based his counterinsurgency platform on “draining the sea from the fish.” The military governments of both Guatemala and El Salvador used this analogy; the civilian population was the sea in which the guerrillas, or the fish, survived. By removing the support base, the guerrillas would lose their supporting environment and eventually the movement would die out. The strategy focused primarily on the Mayan indigenous

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17 Ibid.
communities in the southern highlands, where the guerrilla movement was the strongest. The strategy itself was divided into five steps:18

• Increase the number of soldiers by call up of reserve forces and by forced recruitment of indigenous men for soldiering as well as for paramilitary civil patrolling
• A campaign of pacification that initially concentrated troops for intensified “killing zone” operations
• The establishment of Civil Affairs companies to organize Civil Patrols and to concentrate refugees into model villages
• The expansion of legal justification of counterinsurgency through expanded decree-laws, secret tribunals, and censorship of the media
• A campaign of psychological warfare to win popular support for the army

The implementation of the five steps falls into two separate categories, “scorched earth,” which was intended to eradicate guerrilla forces, and “beans for bullets” which was directed at rebuilding confidence in the central government.

Rios Montt interpreted the definition of “eradication of guerrilla support bases” quite literally, which led to systematic massacres of entire villages and the relocation of the remaining civilians into government-sponsored concentration camps. The military treated civilians as though they were combatants, killing and burning all living things within the secured area; no distinction was made between combatant and noncombatant.19

The development poles, modeled after the “strategic hamlets” from the Vietnam War, fall into the “beans for bullets” area of the counterinsurgency strategy. Basically, their purpose was to rebuild communities in areas controlled by the government, while re-educating inhabitants through roads, schools, and housing, and anti-communist

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propaganda. These development poles were intended to provide the rest of the country with an example of the government’s capacity to provide for its supporters.

Although leftist guerrillas and right-wing death squads also engaged in summary executions, forced disappearances, and torture of noncombatants, the Guatemalan military is responsible for vast majority of human rights violations during the 1980s. The Guatemalan Historical Clarifications Commission reports that the Guatemalan military is guilty of nearly 93% of all human rights violations during the civil war. Of the estimated 626 massacres during the Guatemalan civil war, 590 are attributed to the military, whereas only 36 are attributed to the guerrillas. The Guatemalan military, in turn, received its training and armaments from the Reagan Administration. The Reagan Administration decided to reinstate direct military aid to Guatemala in 1983, based on the performance of counterinsurgency efforts during the Rios Montt regime. Additionally, SOA graduates comprised four of eight military officials in the cabinet of Lucas García, six out of nine under Rios Montt, and five out of ten under Mejía Víctores. Although the increase in military aid spiked sharply following the decline of the most brutal period in the Guatemalan civil war, the United States counterinsurgency strategy and training provided to the Lucas García and Rios Montt regimes during the Reagan Administration proved the most influential on the fragmentation of Guatemalan civil-military relations.

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20 U.S. Department of State “Guatemala Background Notes.”
El Salvador

Parallel to the Guatemalan case, the Salvadoran military government waged a counterinsurgency war against rural Salvadorans. The Salvadoran civil war began in 1979, when armed leftist movements consolidated into the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) or the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front and escalated their attempt to gain control of the central government. To combat the revival of communism in El Salvador, the Reagan Administration supported José Napoleón Duarte, who acquired control of the Salvadoran government in a 1980 coup as the leader of El Salvador’s third military junta since its independence.

The Reagan Administration created a five-step plan for counterinsurgency efforts in El Salvador that targeted civilians as the source of guerrilla strength, similar to the Guatemalan counterinsurgency strategy, focused on guerrillas and civilians in guerilla controlled areas located in the northern highlands:

- Destroy FMLN logistical support-supply and communication lines
- Isolate the guerrilla forces from the rural population
- Wear down the insurgents by forcing them to confront and fight head-on battles with superior government forces
- After completion of the first three phases, the rapid reaction battalion would eliminate the remaining guerrilla forces
- National Plan of 1983: extensive civic action programs known as “Operation Well-Being.”

In addition to Operation Well-Being, the Salvadoran plan included two counterinsurgency campaigns designed to separate the guerrilla forces from the civilian population.

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22 Klare, p. 114
23 I spent the summer of 2002 in the northern highlands of El Salvador, where I encountered bombed out churches in small towns, and locals who willingly shared stories of battles with the military during the 1980s. It was an interesting and eye-opening experience. The civilians who were especially affected by the war refuse to speak to any United States government employees, including Peace Corps volunteers. It took them a while to relax around me, although some never did. Their faith in government is completely destroyed.
base using the same theory of “draining the sea” as in Guatemala. The two campaigns were called “Hammer and Anvil” (1981) and “Operation Phoenix” (1985) which were either led by an officer or an entire battalion trained by the U.S. government at the School of the Americas. The Salvadoran plan also targeted the source of guerrilla strength, which was the civilian population of the northern highlands, especially the regions of Morazán and San Vicente where the guerrilla movement originated.

Perhaps the most notorious example of the Salvadoran counterinsurgency strategy is illustrated by the massacre at El Mozote, a small village in the department of Morazán. On December 7, 1981 the Atlacátl Battalion, a counterinsurgency unit known for its extreme brutality, massacred more than 150 inhabitants of the village of El Mozote. The military government suspected that the village had ties with the FMLN, although El Mozote was in fact a neutral location. In this case however, the definition of “suspected” insurgents as detailed by the SOA manuals identified any inhabitant of a guerrilla controlled zone in El Salvador as the enemy, which led to the demise of the inhabitants of El Mozote. Of the 150 massacred at El Mozote by the Atlacátl Battalion, 85% were children under the age of 12. The leader of the Atlacátl, Diego Monterrosa, was trained at the SOA, along with the majority of the battalion.

Three other high-profile cases illustrate the influence of U.S. military aid in the Salvadoran civil war. Archbishop Oscar Romero was executed with a single bullet from a sniper outside the National Cathedral in San Salvador on March 24, 1980 the day following a sermon in which pleaded with the military to cease human rights abuses
against Salvadoran civilians. The soldier convicted for the murder and those who
planned and ordered the assassination are all graduates of the SOA, in addition to those
who planned the rape and murder of four American Catholic nuns and a Catholic in
layworker in 1980. Additionally, the military officials who planned, ordered, and
participated to conceal the 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her
teenage daughter at the Universidad Central América in San Salvador were also trained
at the SOA. The military officers responsible for the logistical planning and the
execution of each of these plans have been identified by the United Nations Truth
Commission Report on El Salvador, although not all of the guilty parties have been
indicted.

Alternately, “Operation Well-Being” addressed the community-building aspect of
the national anti-communist strategy. It called for local health, education, agriculture,
transportation, and basic reconstruction projects combined with agrarian, political,
judicial, and economic reforms on a national level. The operation was instituted in San
Vicente on June 11, 1983, where the Salvadoran government reopened medical clinics
and schools that had previously shut down due to heavy fighting. The government also
reconstructed refugee camps for civilians that had been forced to relocate throughout
Morazán and San Vicente. The refugee camps intended to display how the government
treated “loyal communities.” Although camp residents received humanitarian aid and
infrastructure programs, they were also subject to strict curfews and interrogation by the
military. The government closely monitored the activities of the camp residents, in order

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25 School of the Americas Watch “Notorious Graduates from El Salvador.”
to prevent the guerrilla movement from re-entering the population. The other aspect of “Operation Well Being” consisted of the creation of “Salvadoran Civil Defense Patrols.” The patrol groups themselves consisted or former members of ORDEN, the hated paramilitary organization which served as the Salvadoran government’s eyes and ears in rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s. The civil patrols themselves proved ineffective because they were specifically targeted by the FMLN for their weapons and supplies. According to one critic, “sending these men out on patrol is a better supply for the rebels than the Nicaraguans.”26

The United States provided the greatest amount of military aid to El Salvador in comparison to the other case studies illustrated in this paper. Military aid flowed continuously from the United States to El Salvador during the civil war; at no time was military aid suspended due to human rights abuses, as in the Guatemalan case. Throughout the 1980s, the Salvadoran counterinsurgency strategy based on LIC resulted in the assassination of an estimated seventy thousand non-combatant civilians, seven thousand disappearances, the internal displacement of over seven hundred thousand internal refugees, and the external displacement of over one million refugees. One possible explanation is that the Carter Administration did not have time to act following the inception of the Salvadoran civil war and its successor, the Reagan Administration, focused heavily on anti-communist policy rather than human rights violations in aid recipient countries. Between 1979 and 1985, the Reagan Administration provided a total of $1.835 billion in military aid to El Salvador. The level of U.S. economic and military aid sharply increased following the onset of the Salvadoran civil war, and spiked as high

26 White, p. 165
as $196.6 million in 1984 alone. Clearly, the intentions of the Reagan Administration focused on military assistance for counterinsurgency efforts.

A ceremony held on December 15, 1992, marked the official end of the conflict, concurrent with the demobilization of the last elements of the FMLN military structure and the FMLN's inception as a political party. At the end of the civil war, more than 75,000 civilians had lost their lives to military brutality. In accordance with the peace agreements, the constitution was amended to prohibit the military from playing an internal security role except under extraordinary circumstances. Demobilization of Salvadoran military forces generally proceeded on schedule throughout the process. A purge of military officers accused of human rights abuses and corruption was completed in 1993 in compliance with the United Nations Ad Hoc Commission's recommendations for peace. Although the Salvadoran society is witnessing a certain level of military accountability for human rights violations during the civil war, and steps have been taken to prevent the military from gaining control of the central government in the future, the extremity of human rights violations and the civil war itself fragmentated the country so deeply that ten years later civil society still feels disenfranchised by the government, and places little trust in the military.

28 Department of State, “Background Notes: El Salvador”.
29 Ibid.
Nicaragua

The application of the LIC doctrine in Nicaragua is unique to all other anti-communist activities in the region. When the anti-communist Contra force was established in 1981, it was actually an insurrectionary force, as opposed to the anti-communist forces in Guatemala and El Salvador that focused on counterinsurgency. The Nicaraguan situation demonstrates the strongest case of U.S. intervention in Central America. In response to the success of the Sandinista revolution, President Ronald Reagan signed National Security Directive (NSDD) 17 on November 23, 1981, which authorized the CIA to work with foreign governments as appropriate to conduct political and paramilitary operations against the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support infrastructure in Nicaragua.  

The Contra strategy sought to topple the Sandinista regime by through the eradication of civil support for the Sandinista government. The CIA and U.S. military officers recruited and trained Nicaraguan exiles to create the Contra force, which primarily consisted of former Guardia Nacional members who were employed by the Somoza military dictatorship to terrorize the population. The CIA also created a specially trained force of “unilaterally controlled Latino assets” (UCLAs) to carry out attacks on Nicaraguan harbors and oil reserves while the Contras attacked rural cooperatives and rural villages in an attempt to undermine civilian loyalty to the Sandinista leadership. The forces received training in temporary U.S. military bases on the Nicaragua-Honduras border. The U.S. CIA agents furnished the Contras backup and

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logistics, while falsely claiming that the UCLAs were not associated with the United States government. Each of the attacks on the Nicaraguan harbors and oil facilities by the UCLAs was designed to debilitate the Sandinista economy and force the government into bankruptcy, which would prevent the Sandinistas from implementing social services that would boost confidence in the government. The CIA distributed a specialized SOA manual to the Contras titled *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare* that states:

> It is possible to neutralize carefully selected and planned targets, such as court judges, magistrates, police and state security officials, etc. For psychological purposes, it is necessary to gather together the population affected, so that they will be present, take part in the act, and formulate accusations against the oppressor.

Basically, the Contras were to demonstrate the punishment inflicted upon those who supported the Sandinista regime through terror and coercion. As a result, this license to terrorize spurred the Contras on a rampage of human rights abuses, including systematic rape of women, and abduction of young men into Honduras to be trained as Contra soldiers. Additionally, the Contras installed more than 135,643 land mines during the civil conflict. The Honduran Army estimated in 2000 that there was one land mine in the ground for every 55 Nicaraguans.

The Contra campaign against the Sandinistas’ civilian support base also contains several elements of the LIC doctrine, primarily:

- Emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification as a task for foreign armed forces who can rely on U.S. training and aid
- Eradication of guerrilla support systems
- Facile description of all leftists involved in violence as terrorists and criminals

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Basically, the Contras were to demonstrate the punishment inflicted upon those who supported the Sandinista regime; by targeting community leaders the Contras sent a message to civilians that the administration implemented by the Sandinistas was not strong enough to resist anti-Communist forces. This system of intimidation ensured that citizens would not voice opposition to the presence of the insurgents in the countryside. It was important to balance the fear and appeal of the Contras, however. In order to soften their image, the Contras were instructed to work side by side with peasants, building, fishing, and repairing to foster the social infrastructure necessary to advance the low-intensity campaign. The provision of social services to civil society in place of the Sandinistas was an additional endeavor to demonstrate the failures of Communist policy in Nicaragua.

Throughout the counterinsurgency period sponsored by the Reagan Administration, the Contras assassinated an estimated 3,652 civilians, wounded 4,039, and kidnapped 5,232 during raids from Honduras between 1982 and 1985. However, the Contras would never have been able to carry out these operations without the U.S. military aid. The presence of U.S. military aid is perhaps the most controversial in the Nicaraguan case. Externally, the Reagan Administration cut all aid to the Sandinista

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34 Burns, p. 58
35 Klare, p. 141
regime in 1981, blocked all multi-lateral loans to Nicaragua, and cut Nicaraguan sugar quotas to the United States by 90 percent. When the CIA carried out a series of acts of sabotage through its UCLA force without consent from congressional intelligence committees, the Republican-controlled Senate became enraged, leading to the passage of the Boland Amendment and subsequent elimination of funding for the Contras.\(^{36}\) Internally, however, the Reagan Administration provided lethal and non-lethal aid to the Contra forces, in spite of the Boland Amendments I and II passed by the U.S. Congress in 1982 that prohibited the federal government from providing military support "for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua."\(^{37}\) In order to circumvent this Congressional mandate, the Reagan Administration, the CIA, and military intelligence collaborated to provide funding to the Contras without congressional approval; two plans helped the Reagan Administration achieve this goal. The first, “Operation Elephant Herd” provided aid to the Contras in a covert program to help the CIA circumvent congressional budget restrictions on the Contra war by transferring ‘surplus’ DOD planes and other equipment to the CIA free of charge.\(^{38}\) The second, “Operation Tipped Kettle” was a joint operation to acquire armaments captured by Israel from the PLO during the siege of Lebanon to fund the Contras.\(^{39}\) The two funding schemes were part of a greater operation known as the Iran Contra Scandal in which Lt. Colonel Oliver North used proceeds from arms sales to Iran while it was at war with Iraq to fund the Contra war.


\(^{37}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
Legitimate military aid to Nicaragua resumed in 1990, when the Sandinista regime entered into negotiations with the Nicaraguan Resistance and agreed to nationwide elections in February 1990. The United States failed to supply Nicaragua with economic aid after the establishment of democratic government, which again illustrates the purely military goals of the United States government in countering leftist insurgencies.

Nicaraguan voters elected the candidate of the National Opposition Union, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, as president. During President Chamorro's nearly 7 years in office, her government achieved major progress toward consolidating democratic institutions, advancing national reconciliation, stabilizing the economy, privatizing state-owned enterprises, and reducing human rights violations. As a result of its tumultuous recent history, Nicaragua is the least developed and most economically disadvantaged country in Central America.

Removing the Cloak of Legitimacy

On the surface, the evidence of near-genocide, massive destruction, and military oppression in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua demonstrates that the goals of the anti-Communists succeeded because the Communist movements and their support systems in each country diminished in each of the three countries. In contrast, it is arguable that the operations failed to fulfill the objectives of the Low Intensity Conflict Doctrine. In retrospect, anti-Communist forces used LIC as an excuse to eradicate the Communist threat through any means possible; the vague nature of its terminology

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provided each of the counterinsurgency forces with the means to interpret the doctrine in a way that would best serve their own goals. In addition, the Reagan Administration violated the sovereignty of the state through its intervention in the domestic affairs in each country. The following four questions address the illegitimacy of the LIC doctrine, and its failure in Central America.

1. What was the real intention of civic action programming?

LIC specifically targets the origin and source of Communist movements, and claims that an increased connection between civil society and the government, accomplished through community-building projects, will draw support away from Communists. The doctrine assumes that civilians are simply looking for a solution to their socioeconomic situation, and will ally themselves with anyone who can provide social services and alleviate their poverty. The best option to improve civil-state relations with civic action campaigns would have been prior to the development of insurgent forces. Instead of addressing rural economic problems as they arose however, the anti-Communist forces chose to wait until the rural situation had spun out of control; their attempt at socioeconomic development was too little, too late. Further, civic action campaigns were only instituted in areas of the country that supported insurgent forces, and were denied to the rest of the civilian population. As a result, the campaigns only served as a means to control civil society rather than to improve the quality of life of civilians, which further demonstrates the illegitimacy of their true intent.
In the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador, the inhabitants of “model villages” or “development poles” were no more than refugees in concentration camps, forced to relocate due to counterinsurgency aggression in their home communities. The civic action campaigns were not designed to improve social situations, which were the real root of the insurgency problem, but rather were designed to prevent civilians from returning to the guerrilla support system. Peasants were forced to commit acts of violence on their own communities through obligatory civilian self-patrols, which further destroyed the notion of community the government claimed it wanted to create in the refugee camps. Additionally, curfews, harassment of camp inhabitants, and propaganda campaigns added to the obligatory nature of acquiescence to the government.

In Nicaragua, the Contras actually destroyed the civic development system provided by the Sandinista government. Rather than working to ensure the well being of the citizens they tried to appeal to, the Contras made the reception of social services conditional. If civilians proved they were loyal to the Contras, they were treated well. If they refused to submit to Contra rule, they were executed. The conditionality of the Contra generosity only confused civilians as to the basis of their intent. On one hand, the Contras claimed to want the best for the nation by overthrowing the leftist government, whereas on the other they treated the citizens of the nation with brutality in order to achieve this goal.

2. What does “eradication of guerrilla support bases” really mean?
Perhaps the most debatable principle of the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine is its instruction to destroy the guerrilla support system, or rather its lack of instruction. The definition of “eradication” is not explained in the doctrine, and was taken in the most literal sense. The vagueness of the definition gave the anti-Communist forces in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua license to use any means necessary to destroy a communist movement. Unfortunately, civilians were defined as the source of Communist support by the LIC doctrine and became the target of military operations. Anti-Communist forces found it much easier to execute entire regions of suspected guerrilla sympathizers than to separate the guerrillas from the civilians. Thus, all inhabitants of a red zone were subject to assassination, and systematic rape and torture. Ironically, targeting civilians with military force only undermined the goal of Low Intensity Conflict to build a positive relationship between civil society and the government. Civilians found it difficult to trust an establishment that gained its allegiance through violence and coercion, rather than trust and assistance programs.

In Guatemala and El Salvador, counterinsurgency forces massacred entire villages under suspicion of guerrilla presence in the area, regardless of whether the inhabitants sympathized with the guerrillas or not. “Draining the sea from the fish” included driving civilians out of communities in red zones through military attacks; those that escaped the massacres were hunted throughout the region until they were placed in relocation camps or executed. In Nicaragua, the Contras followed the psychological warfare manual provided by the CIA. They selected leading members of communities and executed them publicly as a warning to civilians that failure to
comply with the anti-Communist forces would result in their deaths. Additionally, the Contras attacked and assassinated villages that had no political or economic significance, which presented civilians with the image that regardless of their political leanings they were all targets.

3. *Did the Reagan Administration really refrain from intervention in Central America?*

Low Intensity Conflict doctrine served as a response to public dissent in the United States to military intervention in the domestic affairs of foreign countries. Through the LIC doctrine, the Reagan Administration attempted to prove that its intentions in Central America were merely theoretical and supportive of anti-Communist movements, but did not involve U.S. military forces. In contrast to claims that it intended to remain on the periphery of each domestic conflict through the transfer of lethal and non-lethal military aid, the Administration became directly involved because it provided clandestine military and non-military aid to anti-Communist forces, as well as the military strategies tailored to the domestic situations in each country. Initially, Congress cut funding to Guatemala due to the violent nature of its counterinsurgency strategy. Congress also denied funding to the Contras due to the level of direct U.S. military involvement the Contra force required. When the American public discovered the CIA and Department of Defense initiatives to clandestinely funnel money to the Contras, it was outraged. Additionally, the CIA’s special force of UCLA’s in Nicaragua carried out direct attacks against the Sandinista government, which directly contradicted the LIC doctrine stipulation that U.S.
military forces remain uninvolved in the anti-Communist military operations. Although the CIA claimed the UCLA’s were not a military force they nevertheless originated from the U.S. and were funded by U.S. taxpayers’ money. In both cases, the Reagan Administration directly contradicted Congressional decree and the LIC doctrine. The Reagan Administration’s direct intervention in Central America renders the LIC doctrine itself illegitimate, because it required the Administration to circumvent legal means of military aid and the application of U.S. military forces in the region.

4. Did the military strategies based on Low Intensity Conflict defeat the communist forces?

Although the anti-Communist forces reduced the Communist civilian support network, it failed to defeat the Communist movement altogether in each country. The Guatemalan civil war ended in 1996 following the democratic election of Alvaro Arzu in January, and the subsequent cease-fire agreement between the government and the URNG in April. In December 1996, the URNG and the Guatemalan government signed the last of ten agreements leading up to a peace treaty, nearly sixteen years after the original implementation of the implementation of the counterinsurgency strategy based on LIC. 41 In turn, the Salvadoran government finalized a peace treaty with the FMLN on January 16, 1992 and a ceremony in December later that year marked the official end to the conflict, nearly ten years after the implementation of LIC counterinsurgency strategy in the country. The very nature of negotiations between the government and the

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insurgent forces in both countries indicates the ineffectiveness of Low Intensity Conflict theory, which predicted that government military forces would simply have to “clean up” remaining guerrilla troops after their civilian support bases were removed. In reality, the guerrilla movements survived the LIC doctrine, and forced the central governments of Guatemala and El Salvador to negotiate cease fires and reconciliation terms prior to the dissolution of the counterinsurgency forces.

The LIC doctrine failed in Nicaragua because it required the direct application of U.S. military aid. The Nicaraguan 1990 elections indicated a change in social preference to the Sandinista government. The candidate from the U.S. sponsored opposition party, Violeta Chamorro, won fifty-three percent of the electoral vote signaling a defeat of the Sandinistas. The Sandinista party is still present in Nicaragua however, and the Reagan Administration failed to completely eradicate the communist element in Nicaraguan politics. Thus, the Contra movement also failed, because it did not eradicate popular support for the Sandinista movement, nor did it eradicate the party itself.

Conclusion

The United States government had clear objectives in its provision of military aid to Central America during the Cold War era. Specifically, it sought to stymie the growth of communism and leftist ideology and secure the region for democracy. In order to achieve these goals, the United States turned to the militaries of Central American countries with strong leftist movements to implement counterinsurgency strategies using U.S. armaments, training, and strategy. The military strategies based on Low Intensity
Conflict doctrine adopted by anti-Communist forces in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua failed to destroy the civilian support bases for communist insurgencies in each country, and failed to eradicate the communist movements themselves. The interpretation of Low Intensity Conflict doctrine undermined the theory’s effectiveness through the application of coercive terrorism against the same social class with which it desired to build a positive relationship. Additionally, civic action and community development plans that intended to lure civilians away from the guerrilla movements actually served as means to concentrate civil society in an area to monitor their activities. Further, the anti-Communist forces in each country never really sought to improve the quality of life for Communist sympathizers; failure to care for the needs of civilians in their own environment demonstrated the illegitimacy of the military strategies. Lastly, the extent to which the Reagan Administration intervened in the domestic affairs of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua through the provision of military strategies and direct military aid violated the tenets of LIC, which aim to prevent the need for U.S. military intervention in foreign countries. In sum, the use of the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine in the anti-Communist military strategies of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua was inherently flawed due to the illegitimate nature of its interpretation, and the contradictions in the implementation of the strategy in each country.
Resources


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