American Anti-Communism and its Chokehold on Democracy in the Western Hemisphere

The impact of anti-communism on American politics cannot be overstated. “...In no legislative or presidential election in a capitalist-democratic regime since 1918... have conservatives failed to exploit the Communist... ‘menace,’” (Liebman et al.). Understanding the legacy of American anti-communist ideology and intervention is integral to unpacking how American actions havestymied the political liberation of numerous countries, notably in Latin America. The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the ideology of American anti-communism and analyze the effect that covert American military support and actions have had on the success of Latin American socialism and illustrate the importance of propaganda as a tool of capitalism.

Anti-communism is at its core, the opposition to the political and economic theories of communism. However, anti-communism is often used in American politics as a synonym for “pro-democracy” or “anti-fasism,” as if the economic or political practices of communism could never exist in a democratic society. Depending on who one associates with intellectually, this line of reasoning may seem perfectly legitimate. Americans have been constantly bombarded with images of human rights violations taking place in socialist states, and traditional American political rhetoric often links capitalism and the free market with freedom and liberty. American politicians have also historically justified military intervention into socialist or pseudo-socialist Latin American countries by claiming that America is fighting to uphold democracy. These claims have led many Americans to believe that the United States and its military stand in opposition of totalitarian states, and that communism dooms impoverished countries to military dictators and breadlines. After all, is it not suspicious that every Latin American attempt at a socialist revolution has resulted in either dictatorship, widespread instability, or both? The historic rhetoric of American presidents would lead one to believe that the reason Nicaragua, Cuba, The Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Hatia (to name a few) have such fraught histories of political struggle is because revolution always leads to destabilization, and never successfully helps or improves the lives of citizens (Blum). While this may have been a useful theory to espouse on the campaign trail in 1971 to win votes in the time honored tradition of red scare fear mongering, the claim that Latin American attempts at socialism failed because socialism is an inherently flawed system has very little basis in fact. A more accurate statement would be that Latin American socialist reforms were often stymied by the United States’s twin obsessions with anti-communism and imperialist military intervention. Most Americans understand that Latin American countries have historically struggled with dictatorship and repressive regimes, but they do not understand the role the United States government has had in exacerbating (and in many cases, causing) those problems.

If one is not well versed in the history of American domestic or foreign affairs, it may be hard to believe that a country so ostensibly committed to the preservation of democracy could have purposefully destabilized so many sovereign nations under the ideological guise of
anti-communism. This can easily be explained: while America has historically attempted to uphold values such as liberty and democracy, America’s interest in democracy is superseded by its commitment to upholding the status quo of capitalism and the economic exploitation of underdeveloped postcolonial states. America has a vested interest in economically exploiting and controlling underdeveloped countries to support its capitalist interests, because any divergence from the system of American economic domination would challenge the United States’s position as a global superpower, and negatively impact the American economy. When considering the tensions of Cold War geopolitics and the relationship between the Soviet Union and communism, America’s fanatic opposition to Latin American socialism falls perfectly in line with the norm of American interventions. Furthermore, America’s history of intervening in other countries’s attempts at establishing democracies and severing ties to foreign capitalist interests goes all the way back to before World War I, with the Phillipine-American War and other Progressive Era imperialist ventures. American anti-communist intervention in Latin American states during the Cold War were simply an extension of historic American imperialist tendencies, albeit often with new ideological packaging.

To fully understand the scope of American intervention, one must reconcile the belief that the purpose of American intervention is to challenge tyranny and dictatorship, not simply to support the economic supremacy of the West. While it would be pleasant to live in a world where the United States only sent troops into countries in response to human rights violations, the reality is that “…the United States opposed only leftist governments, never those of the right, no matter how tyrannical… Washington was supporting right-wing dictatorships in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti and elsewhere… yet the American public fell readily into line in condemning Castro,” (Blum, 176). Clearly, by only denouncing left-wing tyranny but never right-wing tyranny, American politicians prove themselves to not actually be opposed to tyranny, unless said tyranny affects foreign investments by challenging the systems of capitalism. For more modern evidence that American foreign policy has goals other than simply protecting liberty, look to America’s relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel, and those countries’s long lists of human rights violations. Despite this obvious hypocrisy, American intervention was and is still justified to the public under the guise of fighting for democracy. An article published in *Time Magazine* during the Cuban Missile Crisis contrasts Russian missile bases in Cuba and American missile bases in Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran by claiming “The Russian bases were intended to further conquest and domination, while U.S. bases were erected to preserve freedom. The difference should have been obvious to all,” (Blum, 186). *Time* did not go on to specify why exactly American missiles are inherently freedom-seeking, nor how American military actions during this period could be construed as anything other than attempts to conquer and dominate. This kind of imprecise, patriotic rhetoric is the mainstay of American anti-communist justifications for military interventions, and must be recognized as a smoke screen.

It is important to understand precisely what actions the American government took to undermine Latin American self determination during the Cold War, and how those actions affected the efficiency of said states’s reform movements. It would be impossible to concisely list every anti-communist inventionary action taken by the American government, so for the purpose of this paper, the scope of evidence will be limited to American interventions in Nicaragua in the 1980s and 1990s. The history of American intervention in Nicaragua began in the 1850s, and in
1909 the United States successfully overthrew Liberal president José Santos Zelaya to keep conservative pro-American governments in power (Walker et al.). This trend was repeated in the eighties and nineties under President Reagan, with the American financial and military support of the Contras in opposition of the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas were a leftist political faction that took over Nicaragua after the assassination of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, Nicaragua’s military dictator. The United States was concerned that Nicaragua would become overtly Communist and challenge the supremacy of American capitalism, despite the fact that the Sandinistas were not particularly radical socialists nor were they interested in engaging with America. Regardless, a massive campaign was undertaken to destabilize the Nicaraguan state, mostly through the covert funding and training of the Contras, a right-wing guerilla force that opposed the Sandinistas (Arguello, Nietschmann). Many Contras were members of the much hated Somoza regime, and they were undeniably not a force of good in Nicaragua. Nevertheless, because they opposed the Sandinistas, they were supported by the American government.

American interventionary tactics in Nicaragua covered many different policies and initiatives. The United States funded, trained, and gave supplies to the Contras, sabotaged numerous non-military targets, and employed a massive disinformation campaign in an attempt to further delegitimize the Nicaraguan state. From the moment the Sandinistas took power, the United States began to politically intervene and undermine the legitimate Nicaraguan state. President Carter called for the CIA to meet with “moderate” alternatives to the Sandinistas, portraying a remarkable level of insensitivity to Nicaraguan interests by suggesting that the despised national guard (a symbol of the brutality of Somoza’s regime) be reinstated (Blum, 291). Under the Reagan administration, attacks on Nicaragua only increased. Major international banks such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) were pressured by Washington to withhold loans to Nicaragua, and in 1983 the United States opposed a loan to aid Nicaraguan fisherman on the grounds that there was not adequate fuel for their boats. It was later revealed that saboteurs had blown up a major Nicaraguan fuel depot, an action that was described by an American intelligence source as “totally a CIA operation” (Blum, 292). Nicaraguan oil pipelines and agriculture were destroyed by the Contras, whose funding and military equipment were provided by the American government, and Nicaraguan ports were regularly shelled and bombed to block any potential trade. The tactics utilized by the Contras were also incredibly brutal—Americas Watch, a human rights organization, concluded that “the Contras systematically engage in violent abuses… so prevalent that these may be said to be their principal means of waging war” (Blum, 293). The torture and murder of Nicaraguans by the Contras was not only condoned by the CIA- it was encouraged. The CIA even created an instruction manual for use by the Contras that advocated the use of violence against civilians. Let us not forget that this was the same group of rebels that President Reagan called the “freedom fighters” with the “moral equal of our founding fathers” (Blum, 293). The totality of American intervention had catastrophic effects on Nicaragua- there was an annual inflation rate of over 30,000 percent in 1988, and in 2000 Nicaragua had the lowest per capita income of any Latin American country (Arguello, Nietschmann). Successful government aid and education programs introduced by the Sandinistas were drastically scaled back, as the failing economy could no longer support
reforms. America’s goal of safeguarding Latin America from Marxist influences was therefore somewhat successful— the aid programs sacrificed in response to the Contras assault on Nicaragua were, after all, socialist programs. The massive human rights violations carried out by the United States and her allies were merely speedbumps of the international highway of capitalist supremacy.

Despite the depraved display of political, military, and economic subterfuge on the part of the United States, American propaganda campaigns led many to believe that the Sandinistas were equally if not more destructive than the Contras, curtailing many people’s ability to form accurate opinions on American actions during this period. Disinformation and other forms of propaganda were utilized to corrode international perceptions of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas—they were depicted as “... a grim, totalitarian Communist regime and an instrument of Soviet expansionism in the Americas” (Walker et al.). These claims had no basis in fact—the Sandinistas did not create a Soviet-style state, nor did they utilize a fully socialist economic system, and the Sandinistas could not be accurately described as totalitarian. Their social programs were successful, and human rights in Nicaragua ranked them well above most other Latin American countries at the time (Walker et al.). Despite these facts, the portrayal of Nicaragua by the American press was unrelenting negative. This can be seen most clearly in the American press coverage and reaction to the 1984 Nicaraguan presidential election. Despite the fact that international outside observers testified to the fact that the election was free and fair, the Reagan administration denounced the election as a farce in another attempt to delegitimize the Sandinistas. In American and Canadian press coverage of the election, “…legitimizing dimensions of the election [were] covered… [but] they [were] not given equal prominence to the delegitimizing factors,” (Soderlund). The unfair coverage of the Sandinistas is important not only because it represents another American attempt to covertly destabilize a legitimate democracy, but because it illustrates the effect of American anti-communist dogmatism on the American people. If the public is told that Nicaragua is a totalitarian state in league with the Soviet Union, that the Soviets are unilaterally evil, and that the socialist Sandinistas are committing human rights violations left and right—then the American people perhaps cannot be blamed for coming to the conclusion that Latin American socialist revolutions are doomed to end in government repression. Furthermore, it is easy to believe that the Sandinistas were at fault for Nicaragua’s economic spiral if one is not aware of the massive scale of the American intervention. Reagan’s disinformation campaign successfully stymied North and Latin American socialism—it swayed public opinion against the Sandinistas, making it easier to justify the American support of the Contras, and it convinced many Americans that socialism and communism are antithetical to democracy and a healthy state.

These tactics were simply part of a larger trend of American anti-communism that ran rampant during the Cold War, but it is nevertheless integral to deconstruct said rhetoric. The American government spent generations trying to convince its citizens that communism destroys democracy, when it is more accurate to say that the CIA and American-funded military operations destroy democracy. Historical precedent even shows that socialist reform is often much better for Latin American countries than American aid, if only socialist reforms do not trigger the bloodlust of the CIA. In 1961, the Kennedy administration revealed its plan to oppose Cuban socialism by creating a program for social change that would provide Latin American
countries with an alternative to revolution, called the Alliance for Progress. Nine years later, the Twentieth Century Fund of New York claimed that Cuba, which was not the recipient of any American aid, “...came closer to some of the Alliance’s objectives than most Alliance members. In education and public health, no country in Latin America has carried out such ambitious and nationally comprehensive programs….” (Blum). Clearly, socialist reform can be utilized for positive change. Communism is not the issue in Latin America, nor is it grassroots revolutions. The history of the region can lead one to form only one conclusion: it is America, and American capitalist interests, that stands in opposition to the betterment of Latin America.
Bibliography


In the 1930s, even as Americans regularly read news about Jews being attacked on the streets in Nazi Germany, there was no national appetite for increasing immigration. As the waiting lists for U.S. immigration visas swelled, so did anti-Semitism in the United States. In 1939, Sen. Robert Reynolds of North Carolina (who ran his own anti-Semitic newspaper, the American Vindicator), proposed bills to end all immigration for five years, declaring in a June 1939 speech that the time had come to “save America for Americans.” At that moment, more than 309,000 Germans, most of whom were Jews, sat on