

# BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S INTERVENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA SINCE 1946

## 1946 The US Army School of The Americas, Panamá

The US Army opened the School of the Americas (SOA) in Panamá to "modernize" and "professionalize" Latin American Armies. Since then, more than 60 000 SOA graduates have learned about counter-insurgency, weapons training, psychological warfare, interrogation techniques, among other fields of study. With many dictators, assassins and general hatchet men among its graduates, the SOA is held in contempt throughout Latin America. Famous grads include Panamá's Manuel Noriega, Bolivia's Hugo Suarez and the murderers of El Salvador's maverick Archbishop Oscar Romero. The SOA was moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984 and renamed the "Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation" (WHISC) in 2001. Defenders of the institution argue that no school should be held responsible for the actions of some of its graduates. They also point out that every class includes at least eight hours of instruction in human rights and democracy. Critics, however, find it unlikely that the WHISC is any better than its predecessor. They point to manuals such as the one disclosed by the Pentagon in 1996 that referred to "eliminating potential rivals," "obtaining information involuntarily," and the "neutrialization" of people.

## 1954 United Fruit Company, Guatemala

US President Eisenhower funded a Right wing military coup against the popular, Indian dominated government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. Arbenz had expropriated 234,000 acres of land owned by Rockefeller's United Fruit Company, although the company was offered compensation (based on fraudulent tax records). CIA-trained insurgents led by Carlos Castillo took power and proceeded to return all the land seized from the United Fruit Company, abolished the tax on interests and dividends to foreign investors, eliminated the secret ballot for elections and jailed thousands of political critics. Both Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother CIA Director Allen Dulles were investors in the United Fruit.

## 1959 Tonton Macoutes, Haiti

François "Papa Doc" Duvalier became president of Haiti in 1957. He later declared himself president-for-life. Duvalier's regime was particularly brutal, as told by a Haitian: "Duvalier has performed an economic miracle. He has taught us to live without money...to eat without food...to live without live." His police force was called the Tonton Macoutes (Creole for "Bogeyman") and armed with machetes. In 1959, US Marines arrived in Haiti to serve as military advisors and bolster Duvalier's regime; later that year they helped put down an insurrection. The commander in charge of the US operation, Colonel Robert Debs Heinl Jr., claimed that a State Department Undersecretary told him: "Colonel, the most important way you can support our objectives in Haiti is to help keep Duvalier in power so he can serve out full term in office, and maybe a little longer than that if everything works out." By the time Papa Doc died in 1971, his Tonton Macoutes had killed tens of thousands of Haitians and tortured countless thousands more.

## 1960 Ecuadorian Anti-Communist Action, Ecuador

After José Maria Velasco Ibarra was elected president of Ecuador, he refused American demands that he break relations with Cuba and crack down on communists. The US proceeded to infiltrate Ecuadorian political groups; both Left and Right, and create bogus organizations to agitate political disturbances. A CIA officer established a group called The Ecuadorian Anti Communist Front. Since that name was already taken by a legitimate group, however, he had to change the title to Ecuadorian Anti-Communist Action. The CIA also penetrated the postal service and the immigration department to collect intelligence. All this interference culminated with the overthrow of Velasco, who was replaced by Carlos Julio Arosemana, a paid CIA employee. Arosemana proved to be as difficult as Velasco and was replaced with a military junta. It immediately outlawed communism, suspended civil liberties, cancelled the 1964 elections and used the CIA's Subversive Control Watch List to round up the leftists.

## 1960 Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuba

US President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to begin operations against Fidel Castro in Cuba. This included a campaign to destabilize Cuba by burning crops, blowing up ships and sabotaging industry. On April 17, 1961, around 1,400 anti-Castro Cubans landed at the Bay of Pigs, armed and transported by the CIA. The population failed to rise up, however, and promised US air support was held back. Within three days, most of the invaders had been either killed or captured. It was the first time the CIA has been humbled in such way. The next year, president Kennedy instituted "quarantine" on the shipment of offensive missiles to Cuba by the Soviet Union. He also warned the Soviet Union that the launching of any missiles from Cuba against the West would bring US nuclear retaliation, taking the world to the brink of nuclear war.

## 1962 Government Overthrow, Brazil

The CIA began an operation in Brazil to prevent Joao Goulart from taking control of Congress, giving millions of dollars to anti-Goulart candidates. The US feared a "drift to the Left" under his leadership even though Goulart was a millionaire landowner who had offered a toast " to the Yankee Victory!" after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Next, a CIA-backed military coup overthrew Goulart's elected government and installed General Castelo Branco as leader. Branco, with help from the CIA, created Latin America's first death squads.

## 1965 Fear of Communism, Dominican Republic

The US intervened in the Dominican Republic for the fourth time in 58 years, to protect American lives and property during a revolt, and to "prevent another Cuba." They sent more troops as fears grew that the revolutionary forces were under communist control. An estimated 20,000 US troops invaded on April 28. Most of the whites in the country were evacuated by US forces and the popular revolt was smashed, at a cost of 59 Americans killed in action and 174 wounded.

## 1966 The Victims Are Communists, Guatemala

Three years after US president Kennedy installed Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia as Guatemalan leader over an elected politician, the US intervened again. (Peralta's first act after coming to power was to order eight political and trade union leaders killed by having rock-laden trucks drive over them.) The country's new leader, Julio Cesar Méndez Montenegro, allowed the US free reign. Consequently, shipments of American military equipment, helicopters, and weaponry increased. US Colonel

John D. Webber Jr. took command of the American military mission in Guatemala and hinted at his brutal tactics when he told Time Magazine: "The communists are using everything they have including terror. And it must be met." His forces joined Guatemalan military attacks on peasant villages. The CIA was flying bombing and strafing missions against the peasantry using aircraft modified for slaughter with. 50 cal machine guns, small rockets and napalm. USAID and the US Office of Public Safety (OPS) began a major operation to radically expand and militarize the Guatemalan police forces. By 1970 more than 30,000 Guatemalan police had received OPS training in the likes of torture techniques and "disappearances." One State Department official noted with irony: "Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are communists."

## 1966 Death of Che Guevara, Bolivia

A CIA-organized military action captured the legendary guerrilla Che Guevara. The US wanted Che kept alive for interrogation, but the Bolivian government executed him to prevent worldwide calls for clemency. He was 39 years old. Millions mourned after hearing the news of his death.

## 1966 Orden, El Salvador

The CIA financed and assisted General Jose Alberto Medrano in organizing the Orden paramilitary force, the first of El Salvador's infamous death squads.

## 1971 Military Coup, Bolivia

With US Air Force support, the CIA backed a violent military coup in Bolivia in which 500 died. The coup toppled leftist president Juan Torres who had nationalized many of the country's industries, including oil. His replacement, General Hugo Banzer, was trained at the School of the Americas. Banzer's regime became known for using brutal tactics to eradicate leftist elements in the country. He survived 13 coup attempts in seven years as dictator, in the same period, 200 of his political opponents were killed and 150,000 people arrested.

## 1972 Tupamaros, Uruguay

A US-armed and trained military in Uruguay eliminated the Tupamaros (the National Liberation Movement) and instituted a military government. The US worried that a popular Left wing government would be elected - as it had been in Chile the previous year- and that other Latin American countries would follow Uruguay's lead. The military dictatorship lasted 11 years and amassed more than 1,000 political prisoners. Per capita, it was the largest number in the world.

## 1973 September 11, 1973, Chile

Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende was killed in a coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. This action followed three years of covert operations and economic sabotage carried by the CIA. Pinochet received American support throughout his presidency despite his role in torture, killing and disappearance of thousands of Chileans.

## 1977 US troops Withdrawn, Guatemala

Under US president Carter, US troops were withdrawn from Guatemala and most US money was cut off- though arms and cash continued to flow, via Israel. US-trained death squads and the military had killed an estimated 20,000 people in the previous 10 years.

## 1979 Contras, Nicaragua

The US-backed dictator of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza II, fell from power and was replaced the Marxist Sandinistas. The new regime received popular support for their calls for land reform and solutions to poverty. The surviving members of the National Guard, Somoza's brutal secret police force became the Contra rebels that fought a CIA-backed guerrilla war against the Sandinistas throughout the 1980s.

## 1980 Dead Squads, El Salvador

Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador appealed to US president Carter, "Christian to Christian," to stop financing the brutal Right-wing government Salvadoran military dictator Roberto D'Aubuisson. But D'Aubuisson had Romero shot while celebrating Mass. Soon after El Salvador fell into civil war. The CIA and the US military gave the government military intelligence superiority over the rebels who were mostly poor peasants. They then began training the Salvadoran death squads. By 1992 some 63,000 Salvadorans had been killed in the fighting.

## 1980 Military Aid, Honduras

The US began basing Nicaraguan Contra terrorists in Honduras, as well as using Honduran territory to support el Salvadoran dead squads. In exchange, US military aid to Honduras was radically increased and death squads established to eliminate Honduran dissidents. Aid rose from \$16 million in 1978 to \$231 million by the early 1980s.

## 1981 Military Advising, El Salvador

After a guerrilla offensive against the government of El Salvador, the US sent additional military advisers, bringing the total assisting in training government forces in counter-insurgency to 55.

## 1981 Iran-Contra Affair, Nicaragua

As part of its continuing support for the Contra terrorists, the CIA began selling weapons to Iran, via Israel, and using the profits to finance the Contras. This later became known as the "Iran-Contra Affair." This year also saw the Freedom Fighter's manual issued by the CIA to the Contras, which included instructions on economic sabotage, propaganda and general insurgency. The US applied pressure to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to limit and reduce loans to Nicaragua, as well as imposing an economic embargo.

US Senators were so outraged by covert CIA support of Nicaraguan Contras that in 1982 they passed a bill cutting off all money aimed at "overthrowing the Government of Nicaragua." Despite this directive the CIA continued operating in Nicaragua, mining three of its harbors in 1984. Years later, these actions were the basis for a \$17 billion judgment against the US in a case Nicaragua brought before the World Court. The American government did not recognize the decision and never paid the damages. Also, in 1984 US President Reagan set up a front organization directed by Oliver North to solicit donations

fro Contras from wealthy American anti-communists. The program expanded to the point where North's office was providing the Contras with weapons paid for by illegal arm sales to Iran, then considered a "terrorist" state. The US government was forced to admit to the scheme in 1986 when a transport plane carrying military supplies to the Contras was shot down. Survivor Eugene Hasenfus, and two dead pilots all turned out to be CIA employees. North and his secretary quickly shredded documents implicating them and their friends- including Vice President George Bush- but it was too late. Years of hearings and special investigations led to many resignations and a few minor convictions. But the mud did not stick. On Christmas Eve 1992, US President Bush pardoned former Defense Secretary Weinberger, former national security adviser Robert McFarlane and four other officials linked to the Iran-Contra affair, including Elliot Abrams. Today, Abrams serves as a special advisor to the current US President Bush, running the National Security Council's Middle East desk. Bush also tried to redeem John Poindexter, who had also been convicted of lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra affair. In 2002, Bush asked Poindexter to head Total Information Awareness (TIA), a government snooping program that was scaled back after public furor. Even Oliver North landed on his feet, drawing on his Iran-Contra fame to make millions as a high-priced speaker, best-selling author and syndicated columnist. Republicans didn't lose faith in North either, giving him the nod as the Party's candidate for the 1994 Senate race in Virginia, which he lost.

## 1982 Totally Dedicated to Democracy, Guatemala

General Efraim Rios Montt, a former student of the School of the Americas, seized control of Guatemala with US support. After the coup, US arms shipments to Guatemala increased. Rios Montt declared a state of emergency and suspended the rule of law. Within the first six months of his rule 2,600 Indians had been massacred. During his 17 months in power he oversaw the complete destruction of 400 Indian villages. US President Reagan paid a state visit and publicly stated his belief that Rios Montt was "totally dedicated to democracy".

## 1983 Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada

In October the US invaded the Island of Grenada following the overthrow and murder of popular socialist leader Maurice Bishop. The official rationale for Operation Urgent Fury was an "urgent" request for aid from the Organization of East Caribbean States (OECS) who said they "feared and aggressive act" from the new ultra-left regime; there were also concerns for the safety of American students on the island. But the Barbadian PM later said the OECS plea had been triggered by US requests and that regime change had been planned for some time. The initial invasion force of 1,200 troops was met by stiff resistance from the Grenadian army and Cuban military units. Heavy fighting continued for several days, but as the US force grew to more than 7,000, the defenders began surrendering or fleeing into the mountains. The forced regime change in a Commonwealth country saw the usually cozy relationship between Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher plummet to freezing point. Scattered fighting continued as US troops hunted down stragglers, but for the most part the island quickly fell under American control to widespread local support. The conservatives were happy that socialism had been put to rest, and the majority was happy that Bishop's murder had been avenged. By mid-December, US combat forces went home and a pro-American government took power. One of its first acts was to seize books and institute a system of censorship. It also made the US troops "heroes of the republic." By the end of fighting 19 Americans, 49 Grenadians and 29 Cuban nationals had died.

## 1985 Trade Unions, Honduras

Trade unions in Honduras demonstrated against the biggest-ever peacetime exercise in Central America, in which 39 US warships and 7,000 US troops helped the country's army repel a mock Nicaraguan invasion. They feared the Honduran people could be pushed into a war against the Sandinista government.

## 1986 Operation Blast Furnace, Bolivia

US Army personnel and aircraft assisted Bolivia in Operation Blast Furnace, closing down 21 refineries used to make cocaine. Within six months production had fully resumed to pre-operation levels.

## 1986 Baby Doc' Duvalier, Haiti

After a popular revolt, Haitian dictator Baby Doc' Duvalier was evacuated on a US Air Force jet to France, where he retired with millions of dollars. He left behind him the poorest country in the world: more than half the people were unemployed, and four in five were illiterate. A Haitian child has a one on three chance of dying before its fifth birthday. The CIA began working to install another dictator, but popular unrest against more US meddling kept the political situation unstable for the next four years. In an attempt to strengthen the military against the people, the CIA created, trained and supplied the National Intelligence Service. The NIS was "created" to fight the cocaine trade, but it suppressed popular revolt and free expression by means of torture and assassination. In the 21 months after Duvalier's ousting, there were more people killed by the government than in the previous 15 years of his regime.

## 1988 General Noriega, Panamá

In the spring, amid growing calls for the resignation of Panamanian leader General Manuel Noriega and general instability, the US sent 1,000 troops to Panamá to "further safeguard the canal, US lives, property and interests in the area." The forces supplemented 10,000 US military personnel already there. The DEA also indicted Noriega on federal drug charges connected to his involvement with the Medellín cocaine cartel in the early 1980s. It marked the beginning of the end for Noriega, whose criminal acts had long been overlooked in exchange for allowing the US to set up listening posts, aiding pro-US forces in El Salvador and Nicaragua, letting Contras train in Panamá, and acting as a conduit for US arms and money in the region.

## 1989 Military Aid, Colombia, Bolivia and Perú

In early September, US President Bush announced that military and law enforcement assistance along with \$82 million in aid would be sent to help the Andean nations of Colombia, Bolivia and Perú combat illicit drug producers. By mid-September there were as many as 100 US military advisers in Colombia and 500 personnel in the three countries engaged in counter-drug and intelligence services. The end of the Cold War saw the military grow much more eager to work in drug operations, for which funding was rising considerably.

## 1989 General Noriega, Panamá

General Noriega's disregard for results of the Panamanian election received a quick US response from US President Bush. He ordered approximately 1,900 troops to Panamá on March 11, 1989, to augment the estimated 11,000 US forces already in the area, charged with protecting American citizens and bringing General Noriega to justice. Noriega was captured, given a show trial, and then imprisoned for life in isolation inside the US. Official American casualties were 23 troops killed in action, but this number is contested because of a media blackout instituted during the invasion. General Manuel Noriega had been supported by the CIA since 1966 and his drug smuggling was known to the CIA from 1972. However, his growing independence and intransigence resulted in Washington turning against him.

## 1994 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti

After Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted from power in a military coup, the US decided to intervene and restore the rightfully elected president to power. Operation Uphold Democracy was launched on September 19 with UN Security Council approval. As 39,000 US paratroopers were preparing to invade, the Haitian military voluntarily consented to allow the US forces to land peacefully. The airborne troops were returned but 15,000 US soldiers remained in Haiti in order to ensure Aristide's return to power. On March 31, 1995, the US transferred full responsibility for Haiti to the UN.

## 1999 - Present Plan Colombia, Colombia

The Clinton administration initiated Plan Colombia. Although partially earmarked for "social development," the bulk of the \$1.3 billion program to this day continues to assist the military and drug crop eradication. At least 400 US military trainers are active in Colombia. In addition, hundreds of contractors are employed in aerial fumigation to kill coca crops throughout the country using the level III toxin glyphosate at levels far exceeding recommended dosage. The chemical causes environmental damage, as well as human and animal health problems. In 2001, President Bush expanded the program to Ecuador, Perú and Bolivia.

## 2002 Hugo Chávez, Venezuela

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez became a thorn in the US' side thanks to his anti-globalization rhetoric, friendship with Fidel Castro, and criticism of the "war on terror". In 2002, relations became even frostier when Chávez renewed state control of the country's oil industry. At the time Venezuela was the fourth largest oil-producing nation and the third largest oil provider to the US. With so much at stake, the head of the Venezuelan business federation, Pedro Carmona, was brought to the White House. There he met with Otto Reich, who served previously in the Reagan administration, running the Office for Public Diplomacy and reporting directly to Oliver North. Reich is said to have had numerous meetings with Carmona and his associates, discussing explicitly the timing and likelihood of successfully overthrowing Chávez. In April 2002 Chávez was ousted and Washington gave its official support for the coup, endorsing Carmona's unconstitutional government. The New York Times did likewise. A popular uprising began the next day, leading to Chávez's return to power and prompting an about-face by the Bush administration and the Times. In the following years, more details of US involvement surfaced. The US ambassador to Venezuela and two US embassy military attachés are said to have met with the coup leaders just prior to their attempt at dislodging Chávez. And a former US intelligence officer, Wayne Madsen, revealed to the Guardian newspaper that US Navy ships provided electronic jamming during the putsch, blocking Chávez's ability to communicate with his diplomatic allies. For his part, Chávez threatened to halt oil exports to the US and promised a 100-year war if the US invaded. In March 2004 he remarked, "The government of Washington is using the money of its people- not only opposition activities- but acts of conspiracy."

## 2004 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti

American Troops arrived on Haiti's shores for the 27th time in March 2004. Days earlier, as internal resistance to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide mounted, US Secretary of State Colin Powell has asserted, "There is frankly no enthusiasm right now for sending in military." That lack of enthusiasm was set aside once Aristide's opponents clamored at the gates of his palace, and US troops arrived in the capital to secure key sites and protect Americans. They also helped whisk Aristide off to the Central African Republic where he promptly declared that he had been kidnapped. The White House scoffed at the story, calling it "nonsense." Whatever the case, George W. Bush's government was wary of Aristide and had contributed to his downfall. He was a populist who associated with Cuba and resisted neo-liberal economic directives from the World Bank and IMF. The White House claimed he was corrupt and withheld \$500 million of humanitarian aid from Haiti. In the lead-up to Aristide's removal, Powell scolded the "thugs" and "murderers" who were plotting his ouster. As result of the coup, those thugs became the face of Haitian security while 3,450 American troops walked the country's pot-holed streets. Some Haitians greeted the Americans with cheers of "Liberty" while others marched past the US embassy denouncing Yankee imperialism.

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### Bibliography:

All historical descriptions taken from the magazine **Adbusters**: "Hope and Memory 1801- 2004" . www.adbusters.org/media/flash/hope\_and\_memory/fla sh.html, © adbusters 2004 (refer to this website for a complete account of U.S Global Interventionism from 1801 to 2004.)

### **History of US Interventions in Latin America:** www2.truman.edu/~marc/resources/interventions.html

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This paper has no commercial value or intentions.

This is the third edition of this paper, made as part of the project "SOA: Black and White Tales" by Carlos Motta (www.carlosmotta.com/soa.html) exhibited at the Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ; Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT; bôleLatina, Basel, Switzerland; Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami, FL; rum46, Aarhus, Denmark and TEOR/ética, San José, Costa Rica in 2006, at Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena, Italy in 2007 and The ISE Foundation, New York, NY in 2008.

Back illustration is based in the infamous "White Hand" (dead squad) signature in El Salvador 1980.

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