

Meddling in the Americas: The CIA in Latin America

Kaeten Mistry

Secret meddling in foreign countries represents one of the most controversial aspects of U.S. foreign policy. The group most closely associated with covert activities is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Yet for an institution operating in the shadows and shrouded in secrecy, it is remarkably well known inside the United States and around the world. The “Company,” as termed by insiders, is frequently depicted in fiction, has a large online presence, and is active on social media. Nonetheless, for many the CIA acronym is a byword for covert intervention. In the Americas, the agency’s schemes to support select groups and overthrow others have cast a long shadow.

This article examines how the CIA has been involved in hemisphere, why its activities are consistent with long-standing U.S. foreign policy objectives, the struggles to narrate the story of intervention, and the importance of local actors and forces in any discussion of covert operations. The topic is a lens to better understand U.S. history, Latin American history, the global cold war, and contemporary international affairs.

I. The Backyard before the Company

Since the founding of the nation U.S. officials took a keen interest in their Western hemisphere neighbours. As the country increased in size and influence, particularly during the nineteenth century, concerns over who ruled in the Americas grew more acute. In the 1823 State of the Union speech, President James Monroe opposed further European colonisation in the region as several countries achieved independence, notably from Spain and Portugal. Drawing a distinction between Old World and New World affairs, the Monroe Doctrine stated that the U.S. would not interfere in European matters and famously warned Europeans against meddling in the hemisphere.

The Monroe Doctrine was a bold assertion by an emerging power lacking the means to enforce it. For most of the century the declaration was not tested, thanks in part to the British who shared the general objective of constraining continental European empires to protect its own trade with the New World. The Monroe Doctrine would nevertheless become a key symbol for U.S. foreign relations. Communicating the U.S. intention to exert control over the region, it gained further prominence around the 1898 war with Spain. Victory in the conflict not only established the U.S. as a genuine world power, but also one that possessed territories and backed regimes favourable to its business and economic interests. In 1904, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine asserted that it would use “police powers” to maintain the new order in Central and Latin America.

The notion that the region represented a “backyard” was also reflected in the first U.S. intelligence agency operating in Latin America. Run by the Bureau of Investigation – the forerunner to the FBI – who otherwise dealt with domestic affairs, the Special Intelligence Service focused exclusively on the hemisphere. U.S intelligence had a foothold in the Americas.

II. Birth of the CIA

The CIA was formed in September 1947. The experience of two World Wars and growing cold war conflict with the Soviet Union were key factors in the creation of the first permanent foreign intelligence agency in peacetime. The main duties were collecting and analysing information, as it remains today. Yet from the beginning there was a recognition that covert operations should be part of its arsenal. The first small-scale clandestine activities focused on Europe as the U.S. sought to both ‘contain’ the communist threat in the western part of the continent and ‘liberate’ areas in the east.

In the western hemisphere civil unrest and nationalist movements were increasingly seen through a cold war lens. During the Pan-American Conference in Colombia in 1948, rioting broke out in Bogota after the assassination of the left-wing presidential candidate. Amid the violence, the gathered delegates created the Organization of American States (OAS) to bolster solidarity and cooperation between nations. The U.S. wanted the OAS to serve as a hemispheric bulwark against communism, with events in Bogota providing further momentum for officials to complement such overt policies with more covert tools.

III. Cutting Covert Teeth

The resources and scale of CIA operations quickly expanded. The focus was principally on Europe during the late-1940s, but the battlefield expanded as the cold war became global. Covert operations supported overt war in Korea (1950) and were central as the CIA and Britain's MI6 coordinated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected leader Mohammad Mossadegh (1953).

In 1954 the CIA organised a coup that removed Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz and installed a military dictatorship. Árbenz's left-wing government included some communists (he himself was not one) and, furthermore, oversaw a series of land reforms that impacted U.S. businesses in the country. This was sufficient for U.S. leaders to authorise Operation PBSuccess, the codename for the operation, which established a precedent for how Washington sought to remove leaders deemed unfavourable to U.S. interests and replace them with pliant allies.

The Guatemalan operation would go down in CIA folklore. But it was also a precursor to how supposed short-term success had harmful long-term consequences. Guatemala was plunged into a forty year civil war while other countries – in the region and beyond – became increasingly suspicious of CIA activities.

IV. The Cuban Obsession

No country epitomised the CIA's obsession with covert tactics more than Cuba. Having exercised strong control over the island since the beginning of the century through military dictators and strongmen, U.S. domination ended with the advent of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Once again, land reform and nationalisation undermined U.S. business interests while the example of a one-party socialist state 100 miles from Florida posed a powerful symbolic threat.

In 1961 the U.S. government reacted by sponsoring a covert operation to overthrow Castro. The CIA, working with anti-Castro exiles, launched a paramilitary invasion of the island at the Bay of Pigs. The invading force was routed by Castro's forces who were organised, popular, and been forewarned about the plot. The Bay of Pigs was a great embarrassment for the United States, including President John F. Kennedy, although the CIA bore the brunt of criticism. The fiasco pushed Castro into a closer relationship with the Soviet Union and contributed to the tensest moment of the cold war in the following year, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Nonetheless, covert plans for regime change in Cuba continued in subsequent years through Operation Mongoose. Numerous plots reminiscent of James Bond novels and movies were hatched to overthrow Castro, including the use of poison pens, drug-laced cigars, poison wetsuits, and exploding seashells. The CIA even recruited Castro's sister. Yet Fidel and Cuba remained a thorn in the side of the United States for decades to come, a potent emblem of resistance to U.S. power in Latin America and across the Global South.

V. Backing Dictators

During the 1960s and 1970s a series of coup d'états saw right-wing, military, and authoritarian leaders come to power across Latin America. The precise scale of CIA involvement is uncertain although the upshot was that U.S.-friendly regimes were installed in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Salvador, and Uruguay,

among others. A particularly prominent case was Chile where Salvador Allende, the first socialist and Marxist to be elected President in a liberal democracy in the region, was overthrown and killed in 1973. Once again, the extent of direct CIA involvement is debated, but undermining Allende and backing the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet were unequivocal priorities for U.S. foreign policy.

The CIA subsequently provided crucial support to Pinochet and other authoritarian regimes in the name of bolstering anti-communist forces. Furthermore, it backed a broader campaign of political repression and state terror by Latin American dictatorships. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, Operation Condor led to the disappearance, imprisonment, torture, and murder of hundreds of thousands of leftists, dissidents, labour leaders, peasants, teachers, intellectuals, students, religious leaders, and suspected guerrillas. The CIA also armed and supported right-wing rebel forces opposing the Marxist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

In September 1976, the terror campaign reached the United States when a car bomb went off in the heart of Washington DC. The explosion, orchestrated by Pinochet's regime, killed Orlando Letelier, a former official in Allende's government. It remains the only case of state-sponsored assassination in the U.S. capital.

VI. Documenting Secret History

With the end of the cold war and facing increased questions about its purpose in a world without the Soviet Union, the CIA set out to tell its story to the public and paint a more positive PR image. In the 1990s it set up an entertainment industry liaison programme to influence fictional accounts about intelligence on film and TV. Hollywood continues to work closely with the CIA on films "inspired by real events" today.

The CIA also declared a new period of "openness" and transparency, befitting an institution of a democratic society. Historians eagerly anticipated the era as the CIA announced the release of records for key cold war era interventions. The first project related to PBSuccess with a professional historian, Nick Cullather, hired to review CIA files and write an official history of the 1954 Guatemalan coup. The project was eventually released to the public, however, it proved to be a one-off. No other histories subsequently appeared as "openness" proved fleeting.

Scholarship on the CIA nevertheless blossomed. One approach has been dominated by social scientists, former officials, and ex-spies, that seeks to explain the "reality" of intelligence work. Another approach examines the broader context in which the CIA operates, exploring culture, fiction, and the locales in which intervention occurs. It has restored the voices of Latin Americans. Some of the most important recent studies explore how covert operations do not rely solely on the CIA but also local actors and transnational groups. This research considers intervention in the context of Latin American history, politics, and society. By drawing on Latin American sources and Spanish language material, historians have revealed the autonomy and agency of Latin Americans in both resisting and encouraging CIA activities.

VII. The 21st Century

The early twenty-first century saw a turn toward left-wing governments in Latin American countries. The "pink tide" brought populists, socialists, and opponents of neoliberalism to power, including in Brazil, Bolivia, and most prominently in Venezuela. To varying degrees the countries opposed U.S. domination and power in the hemisphere. Old foes were again in Washington's cross hairs, with attempts to tie Castro's Cuba to state sponsorship of terrorism.

It is too early to know the covert schemes devised by the CIA. Yet it is also crucial to acknowledge how events are shaped by local voices, actors, and contexts. On the one hand, the pink tide has been followed in some countries by electoral victories for conservative leaders favourable to Washington. On the other,

nations continue to defy U.S. power. While the CIA's bête noire Fidel Castro died in 2016, Cuba remains under Castro control (his brother, Raul) as a one-party state. And when the U.S. whistleblower Edward Snowden, who revealed the global surveillance programmes of U.S. intelligence agencies, sought refuge his intended destination was Bolivia. (He would be marooned in Russia after the U.S. government revoked his passport while in transit to La Paz).

VIII. Conclusion

Recognised all over world, the CIA is a symbol of U.S. foreign policy It is synonymous with the most contentious episodes of meddling in sovereign countries. The spectre of CIA covert operations continues to shape Latin American politics, society, and culture. Examining the CIA's role tells us about U.S. foreign policy, but it also tells us about the historical agency of indigenous groups and actors. Intervention, whether resisted or effective, is an Americas story.

Kaeten Mistry is a historian of the U.S. and the world at the University of East Anglia.

Info Boxes

Key figures

Allen Dulles (1893-1969). Director of CIA during the early cold war, including prominent covert operations to overthrow leaders in Iran and Guatemala. One of the most experienced U.S. spies who also wrote about intelligence.

Fidel Castro (1926-2016). Cuban revolutionary and politician. Led the Communist Party in Cuba and ruled the country as Prime Minister and President. Instigated range of socialist policies at home and revolutionary missions abroad. Survived countless CIA plots to overthrow his regime and kill him.

Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006). General, politician and dictator who ruled Chile from 1973 to 1990. Overthrew the democratically elected Salvador Allende. Receiving support and backing from the United States during his regin.

Robert Gates (1943–). Former CIA official and director, who oversaw the short-lived “openness” initiative in the early 1990s. Later served as Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Chronology

- 1947: Creation of the CIA
- 1954: Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz overthrown
- 1961: Failed CIA operation to overthrow Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs
- 1973: Overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende and ascent of military dictator Augusto Pinochet
- 1992: CIA “openness” initiative to be more publicly transparent

Questions/Points for Discussion

- What are the challenges for historians in writing about the history of the CIA?
- Why are Latin American voices often neglected when discussing covert operations?
- Have CIA covert activities harmed or hampered U.S. foreign policy objectives?

Further Reading

For a good overview of covert operations, read Richard H. Immerman's *The Hidden Hand: A Brief History of the CIA* (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), especially pp.48-76, 124-132

The National Security Archive is one of the largest repositories of declassified U.S. document, including numerous records on the CIA: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/>

The CIA has its own online reading room which includes some documents that have been officially released: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/>