

BEYOND US HEGEMONY: *Reevaluating Central America's Cold War Through Local Agency and Transnational Dynamics*

William Michael Schmidli. *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion, and U.S. Intervention in the Late Cold War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. Pp. 324. \$49.95 cloth; \$32.99 e-book.

Allen Wells. *Latin America's Democratic Crusade: The Transitional Struggle against Dictatorship, 1920-1960*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024. Pp. 715. \$55.00 cloth; \$55.00 e-book.

Eline Van Ommen. *Nicaragua Must Survive: Sandinista Revolutionary Diplomacy in the Global Cold War*. Oakland: The University of California Press, 2024. Pp. 294. \$85.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper; \$29.95 e-book.

Sarah Foss. *On Our Own Terms: Development and Indigeneity in Cold War Guatemala*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. Pp. 334. \$99.00 hardcover; \$29.95 paperback; \$ e-book.

In the 1980s, former US President Ronald Reagan's obsession with destroying Nicaragua's Sandinista government, along with leftist guerrilla forces in El Salvador and Guatemala, made Central America a pivotal battleground in the late Cold War. This intense US involvement in the isthmus spurred significant scholarly interest. Indeed, the 1980s and early 1990s saw US scholars publishing important works that traced the political and economic development of the isthmus. These years also saw increased attention on the historic role the US government, as well as US corporations, most especially, the United Fruit Company, played in destabilizing the region's governments. Scholars in these years also sought to understand the internal dynamics—such as socioeconomic inequalities, the dominant role of the military, and the concentration of political power in elite hands—that fueled civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, while also exploring why and how Costa Rica avoided armed rebellion. In sum, the 1980s were marked by a surge of scholarly production in Central American history.

By the mid-1990s, as Central America's Cold War-charged civil wars ended, foreign scholarly interest in the region began to decline. However, many underlying issues that fueled these conflicts have persisted and worsened in some cases. Recently,

narcotrafficking has intensified problems of corruption, impunity, socioeconomic inequality, and political instability—conditions that are now driving mass migration from the isthmus to the United States. These developments, which have direct implications for US interests, are rekindling foreign scholarly attention in the region. This renewed interest is further supported by the recent declassification of US government records from the 1980s, which have the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the final chapter of Latin America's Cold War in Central America.

The five books selected for this review each examine the Cold War era, revisiting key issues that preoccupied Central Americanists in the 1980s. These new scholars offer fresh approaches and perspectives to some enduring questions and make use of newly available sources. William Michael Schmidli's *Freedom on the Offensive* and Eline Van Ommen's *Nicaragua Must Survive* both address Central American foreign policy and human rights in the 1980s, but with distinct focuses. Van Ommen examines the role of European solidarity networks, while Schmidli focuses on the evolution of the Reagan administration's foreign policy toward the isthmus. Sarah Foss's *On Our Own Terms* explores how life in rural Guatemala was transformed after the 1954 United States-backed military coup, highlighting the agency of Guatemalan campesinos, community leaders, and state and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers in negotiating government efforts to shape the countryside. Atalia Shragai's *Cold War Paradise* explores how Costa Rica became a sanctuary for tens of thousands of US American expats disillusioned with US Cold War policies. Shragai finds that few who relocated to Costa Rica secured legal residency or citizenship, thus further exposing the enduring neocolonial disparities in United States–Central American relations at the individual level. Allen Wells' *Latin America's Democratic Crusade* provides a detailed study of a group of Latin American politicians who pursued democratic and capitalist reforms in a way that they hoped would not challenge US hegemony. This work sheds considerable light on why some Latin American politicians, who ostensibly supported democracy, backed the 1954 Guatemalan coup that unseated a democratically elected president. Given the coup's significant regional and arguably global impact as marking the onset of the Cold War in Latin America, this work has considerable implications for the field.

Each of these works underscores that the history of Central America cannot be understood in isolation. This region has been profoundly shaped by US political, military, and economic intervention. The authors of these recent studies acknowledge the decisive role of US policymakers in shaping national and regional trajectories during the Cold War. However, unlike earlier scholars, these authors eagerly highlight the agency of other historical actors. They underscore the large and small ways that Central American politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens influenced Cold War transformations. Additionally, these works explore the roles that NGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international solidarity networks—both United States-based and European—played in defining Central America's Cold War. Collectively, these

studies demonstrate the potential of contemporary Central Americanists to reshape traditional perspectives on the Cold War and US regional relations in significant ways.

William Michael Schmidli's *Freedom on the Offensive* is a diplomatic history that analyzes how the Reagan administration redefined human rights through a democracy promotion lens that was narrowly concerned with foreign governments' commitment to protecting civil and political liberties. Schmidli illustrates how Reagan's efforts to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government and defeat leftist guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala crucially shaped these policies.

Reagan's decision to construct a foreign policy centered on the promotion of human rights was, as Schmidli documents, unexpected. During his presidential campaign, Reagan had criticized Jimmy Carter's human-rights-focused policies as detrimental to US interests. Upon assuming office, the Reagan administration promptly sought to normalize relations with South American dictators known for their egregious human rights violations, such as Chile's Augusto Pinochet, prioritizing their staunch anti-communism over ethical considerations. However, the administration's disregard for human rights soon emerged as a political liability, as members of Congress obstructed key legislation necessary for implementing Reagan's ambitious foreign policy objectives. In response, Reagan and his advisors redefined human rights in relation to the promotion of democracy, a strategic shift that would become the cornerstone of his foreign policy and ultimately help him garner bipartisan support in Washington, D.C.

Unlike traditional diplomatic histories, Schmidli does more than analyze the evolution of Reagan's foreign policy to assess the effects of these policies on Nicaraguans and the United States-based solidarity movement that sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to counter Reagan's actions in Central America. Using recently declassified government sources from this period, these chapters support Schmidli's central argument that Reagan's commitment to democracy promotion and human rights stemmed from his recognition that a robust anticommunist US foreign policy required bipartisan support. He describes this as a "dual containment strategy" aimed at both restricting the global spread of communism and curbing domestic liberal internationalism.

As Schmidli shows, the Reagan administration's rhetorical shift had far-reaching consequences for Nicaragua's Sandinista government, which came to power in 1979 with a commitment to eliminating the inequalities that had fueled their successful guerrilla movement. The Sandinistas contended that authentic democracy was built on the promotion of social and economic rights and justice. The Reagan administration rejected this vision of democracy, even after the Sandinistas won free and fair elections. The White House instead defined Nicaragua as a Soviet satellite and a threat to US national security because of the new government's ties to Cuba and their support for leftist guerrillas in neighboring El Salvador. This perspective created opportunities for Reagan to counter perceived Soviet influence in the Third World by destabilizing Nicaragua. Central to this

effort was the counterrevolutionary force organized, funded, and trained by the United States, the Contras, who soon garnered a notorious reputation for destroying schools, clinics, and other infrastructure, as well as for committing acts of torture, rape, and murder. Schmidli persuasively argues that the bipartisan consensus was a pivotal development in late Cold War US foreign relations, as it permitted the Reagan White House to pursue an aggressive policy against Nicaragua's democratically elected government, whilst, ironically, proclaiming they were promoting democracy.

One of Schmidli's most significant contributions is his detailed examination of how the Reagan administration fostered right-wing activism. He highlights key figures such as Otto J. Reich, who led the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean (S/LPD). Reich collaborated closely with the White House to mobilize wealthy private donors and organizations committed to a staunchly anti-communist foreign policy, including Jack Wheeler, a wealthy adventurer, who, as a private citizen, visited anti-communist guerrillas, including the Afghan Mujahideen and Nicaraguan Contras. Wheeler reported to the CIA on these interactions and leveraged his experiences to secure funds from other conservative donors to support these groups and Reich's efforts. The S/LPD orchestrated a comprehensive campaign—including speaking tours, press conferences, and publications—to sway public opinion in favor of US intervention in Central America by countering negative reports with pro-administration materials. Reagan officials credited the S/LPD with securing Congressional aid for the Contras in 1986, despite mounting evidence of human rights abuses. Schmidli argues that the strategic use of democracy-promotion rhetoric likely overshadowed the impact of the efforts of the S/LPD and donors to discredit Reagan's critics. Nevertheless, the millions of dollars funneled into a misinformation campaign—later exposed as part of the Iran–Contra Affair—underscore why, despite Reagan's bipartisan support and rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion, left-wing activists and journalists struggled to achieve their policy objectives during this period.

As Schmidli convincingly illustrates, Reagan's adept use of democracy promotion and human rights rhetoric to define his aggressive foreign policy in Central America allowed both him and his successor, George H. W. Bush, to channel millions of dollars to the Contras. They claimed that supporting the Contras would somehow lead to free elections in Nicaragua in 1990, despite the fact that the Sandinistas had already held fair and free elections in 1984. Additionally, in the name of democracy promotion, the United States invested millions in creating a unified political opposition party and funded its political campaign. These efforts were instrumental in ensuring the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990 and demonstrated the effectiveness of democracy promotion to Washington policymakers. As Schmidli suggests in his conclusion, this approach would later serve as a playbook for the George W. Bush administration in justifying the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Reagan's efforts to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government is also at the heart of Eline Van Ommen's *Nicaragua Must Survive*. This work uncovers the history of

Sandinista grassroots diplomacy in Western Europe, complicating historians' understanding of the Sandinistas' endeavors to establish a new international order. Van Ommen contributes to a recent trend to examine Latin America's Cold War within a global context, complicating the conventional focus on the United States' predominant role in the region. Where Schmidli helps us to better grasp how Reagan's foreign policy was shaping and being shaped by US domestic politics, *Nicaragua Must Survive* sheds light on Sandinista leaders' endeavors in the 1970s and 1980s to enlist Western Europeans and the Soviet Bloc to counter US aggression toward their revolution.

Van Ommen conducted extensive archival research in Cuba, Germany, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, the United Kingdom, and the United States, enabling her to craft an impressively cogent narrative that emphasizes the crucial role played by solidarity activists in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s in the Sandinistas' pursuit of political power and global legitimacy. She persuasively argues that Western European activists were pivotal in influencing their nations' leaders to provide economic and political support to the Sandinistas, or at least to deter European leaders from ignoring US aggression in the Americas.

Van Ommen traces the Sandinistas' rise to power in the late 1970s, their efforts to consolidate political power domestically and internationally throughout the 1980s, and their struggles with the human, political and economic toll of the United States-backed Contra war that arguably culminated in their electoral defeat in 1990. While acknowledging the significant influence of the United States in this history, Van Ommen also emphasizes Nicaraguan agency and Sandinista endeavors to counter US aggression through conventional diplomatic channels, but above all through grassroots diplomacy in Western Europe.

Van Ommen underscores the crucial role of grassroots activism in Western Europe in garnering support for the Sandinista government. The mobilization of solidarity efforts, particularly after the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, significantly influenced European foreign policy. Most notably, the *brigadista* program engaged European volunteers in Nicaragua at work on coffee farms, schools, and infrastructure projects. Upon returning home, *brigadistas* acted as powerful witnesses to both Sandinista achievements and Contra atrocities, fueling public interest in and outrage with the United States' support of the Contras. This activism effectively influenced European leaders to participate in the historic San José Dialogue, which marked the first time European Community foreign ministers chose to come together in an official capacity to shape foreign policy outside of Europe. The decision to invest such diplomatic energy on Central America reflects, as Van Ommen convincingly shows, how grassroots activism helped shape European foreign policy. Tragically for the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), later in the 1980s as European governments increasingly leaned toward the right, their interest in providing Nicaragua with political and economic support would wane significantly.

Van Ommen's analysis, however, also reveals the motivations behind key Sandinista diplomatic, political, and economic actions. For instance, she offers insight into Daniel Ortega's 1985 visit to Moscow following the US Congress's rejection of an aid package requested by then-US President Ronald Reagan for the Contras. This visit, which was misinterpreted by many in Europe and the United States as proof US claims that the Sandinistas were Soviet stooges, was triggered by Mexico's decision to end a favorable petroleum deal with Nicaragua, prompting Ortega to seek out alternative sources of fuel. Misunderstandings surrounding the cause and goals of Ortega's visit enabled Reagan and his allies to garner support from the US Congress for a more aggressive foreign policy with Nicaragua with little protest from Western Europe.

In her conclusion, Van Ommen acknowledges changing perceptions of the Sandinistas, particularly since Ortega's re-election in 2007 and the FSLN's brutal crackdown on human and civil rights that began in 2018. *Nicaragua Must Survive* largely pushes these events to the side to consider Ortega and the Sandinistas exclusively within a 1980s context. This is perhaps a missed opportunity, but by highlighting the significant role European activists played in supporting the Sandinistas' quest for legitimacy, improving Nicaraguan living standards, and pressuring the United States to cease attacks on Nicaragua, Van Ommen offers readers a nuanced understanding of this chapter of Central America's Cold War. Moreover, she contributes to a broader and important trend of decentering the United States–Latin America focus of Cold War history in the region by considering the key role European policymakers and activists played in shaping Cold War outcomes.

Historian Sarah Foss's *On Our Own Terms* offers an impressively comprehensive examination of development during Guatemala's Cold War. In this exceptionally well-researched study, Foss investigates the experiences of seven rural communities, predominantly Indigenous towns, throughout this tumultuous 42-year period. Her scholarship comprehensively addresses development projects from Guatemala's 1944 democratic revolution, through the 1954 coup, and into the violent 36-year-long civil war that ultimately concluded in 1996.

On Our Own Terms convincingly argues that development efforts were central to the strategies of both Guatemalan and US policymakers, who aimed to transform the Guatemalan countryside into a model of political stability and national modernization. Her meticulous analysis of a broad range of primary sources from both Guatemala and the United States reveals that these development projects were conceived as top-down initiatives intended to create a more homogeneous nation-state. These efforts, however, were often impeded at the local level, a point Foss emphasizes through over 60 oral histories collected from former development agents, Indigenous community members, and military officials. Her close reading of these oral histories, alongside archival sources, demonstrates how community members, local leaders, and regional bureaucrats

frequently negotiated and adapted these projects to align better with local needs and interests.

Foss argues that local development agents were middlemen engaged in a “multilayered process” of negotiations between aid recipients and policymakers and agency heads in Washington, D.C., and Guatemala City. Following a trend initiated by scholars such as Cindy Forester and Greg Grandin, in the early 2000s, this book highlights Mayan agency in the Cold War—an aspect that was often underplayed by scholars of the 1980s, who were seeking to draw attention to the genocidal nature of United States-backed military massacres taking place at the time in the Guatemalan countryside. Many of these scholars sought to counter Guatemalan government claims that villages were attacked as legitimate targets in the civil war by portraying Mayans as apolitical and passive victims. This genocide, however, as Foss asserts, also underscores the limitations of Mayan agency and reveals the racist underpinnings of the Ladino state’s actions in the countryside, even when those actions were framed as efforts to support local prosperity.

Foss frequently explores the idea that development efforts in Guatemala were aimed at “making the Indian walk,” a phrase she traces back to the Cuban nationalist José Martí. This expression gained significance in Guatemala in 1941, when Carlos Girón Cerna, the nation’s Consul to Mexico, invoked Martí’s words in a proposal to define development goals for the Americas. Foss notes that, for Ladino politicians during the Cold War, such as Girón, development projects were essential for alleviating Indigenous poverty and securing Indigenous support for the state, thereby mitigating the threat of rebellion or revolt. However, the phrase itself implies that both Martí and Girón believed Indigenous peoples needed to be compelled to modernize, suggesting they were not actively seeking to improve their circumstances. This perspective also indicates that Ladino officials felt it necessary to exert a degree of force or coercion to encourage Indigenous peoples to accept development initiatives.

Foss traces this concept throughout her analysis to argue that development projects often served as vehicles for controlling and surveilling Guatemalan Indigenous communities. Yet, this argument is complicated by her equally central claim that Indigenous communities frequently used development projects as tools to insert themselves into the nation-building process, securing state and international resources to support their interests. In this context, Foss demonstrates how Indigenous communities succeeded in dismantling the long-held racist belief that ladinoization was necessary for modernization, proving to Ladino development agents and government officials that they could remain Indigenous while modernizing.

Foss demonstrates, however, that, when Indigenous communities diverged from state-sanctioned developmental paths, the consequences could be catastrophic, as illustrated by the Ixcán Grande colony, established by Maryknoll priests in 1968. The colony, initially hailed as a model of development, faced dire repercussions when, in the late 1970s,

community leaders refused to authorize petroleum and mineral extraction companies to access their lands. This refusal prompted military officials to perceive the community as obstructive to national development. As Foss details, when community leaders sought to “walk” in directions that Ladino officials had not sanctioned, they were viewed as threats to the nation-state. The situation further deteriorated when guerrillas from the Guatemalan Army of the Poor (EGP) began infiltrating the Ixcán region. By the 1980s, the military labeled the colonists as “prohibited Indians,” using this designation to justify their “elimination.” Foss elucidates how the military’s failure to recognize the internal political diversity within the colony, particularly regarding the EGP and the community’s development plans, resulted in a monolithic perception of all Indigenous people in the area as subversives. Her research ultimately then reveals how the intersection of anti-Indigenous racism and anti-communism culminated in a genocidal campaign against the residents of Ixcán.

Foss compellingly illustrates that during the Cold War substantial resources were funneled into Guatemalan rural areas with the intent of lifting Indigenous communities out of poverty and preventing their alignment with guerrilla movements. Although she acknowledges that Ladino development agents often approached Indigenous communities with good intentions and a willingness to collaborate on infrastructure projects, she also emphasizes the constraints on Indigenous agency. In a geopolitical climate polarized by the struggle between communism and anti-communism, any deviation from state-sanctioned developmental paths could have dire consequences, especially in the 1980s, when the Guatemalan military undertook a scorched earth campaign in the highlands. Foss’s analysis elucidates how particular communities could swiftly shift in perception from benign or well-regarded entities to subversive threats, warranting elimination by the state. This work significantly enhances historians’ understanding of the complexities surrounding Indigenous agency and state violence in Guatemala, revealing the underlying mechanisms of racism and coercion that characterized the interaction between the Ladino state and Indigenous populations during the Cold War.

During the Cold War, the outbreak of civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, compelled tens of thousands of Central Americans to flee. Many sought refuge in the United States, while others migrated to neighboring countries, particularly Costa Rica. Central Americans, however, were not the only ones on the move during this period; tens of thousands of US Americans also relocated to Costa Rica, a topic explored in Atalia Shragai’s *Cold War Paradise*. This historical ethnography combines traditional archival research with 65 interviews of self-identified “expats” who migrated to Costa Rica between 1945 and 1980. Shragai argues that these “lifestyle migrants” developed a sense of community rooted in their shared language, citizenship, and cultural background, as well as their relative financial privilege.

Shragai's research reveals a distinct divide between those US Americans who arrived in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s and those who came in the 1970s and 1980s. Many in the earlier waves viewed themselves as pioneers, colonists, or pilgrims, celebrating their efforts to "tame" or "civilize" dense rainforests as they constructed homes, established pastures, and planted fields. In contrast, newcomers in the later decades often came seeking to escape the pressures of modernity, particularly the capitalist emphasis on commercialism and materialism. Despite cutting down wilderness to build homes and roads, these later arrivals portrayed themselves as living "in tune" with nature.

US expats in this second group tended to be much more critical of US Cold War foreign policy, particularly regarding the Vietnam War, which many viewed as a neocolonial conflict. Shragai convincingly argues that this rejection of US neocolonialism profoundly influenced the narratives these expats crafted to explain their relocation to Costa Rica. Despite the inherent financial privilege afforded by the strength of the US dollar, which enabled them to purchase land and vehicles and secure labor easily, these later arrivals sought to reframe their presence. Meanwhile, earlier US expats celebrated the way socioeconomic inequities between Costa Rica and the United States provided expats with tremendous opportunities. Those who settled in the final decades of the Cold War often played down their socioeconomic power, describing themselves as "privileged guests" who had come without a desire to stay, but had done so, for the benefit of their Costa Rican neighbors. In essence, they aimed to present themselves not as neocolonialists exploiting the relative poverty of the local community but rather as generous benefactors contributing to their new home.

Even though the US expatriate community in Costa Rica often rejected the notion that their relative financial privilege played a role in their relocation, members of this community rarely made genuine efforts to integrate into Costa Rican society. Shragai notes that few US citizens, whether they arrived in the 1940s or the 1970s, sought legal residency. Moreover, likely reflecting the stigma associated with the term in the United States, they preferred to identify as "expats" rather than "immigrants." Ultimately, these US Americans aimed to maintain the possibility of returning "home" by retaining their US citizenship, regardless of whether or not they settled permanently in Costa Rica. Their ability to reside there without fear of deportation underscores the historically rooted neocolonial inequities that characterize United States–Central American relations.

Shragai's work significantly enhances our understanding of the Cold War in Central America by complicating existing narratives about US colonialism and imperialism in the region. Traditional scholarship of United States–isthmian relations has primarily focused on the power imbalances arising from US corporate investments, resource extraction, and government interventions. In contrast, Shragai shifts the lens to examine how these broader dynamics influenced interactions between ordinary US citizens who relocated to Central America and local populations.

Her oral histories reveal that the discourses employed by US and Costa Rican policymakers often resonated with both expatriates and Costa Ricans. She convincingly argues that the steady influx of tens of thousands of US citizens bolstered Costa Ricans' faith in their exceptionalist national narrative, which portrays the country as Central America's most peaceful, democratic, egalitarian, and "white" country—emphasizing European heritage over indigenous or mixed-race identities. Moreover, Shragai posits that white US Americans were welcomed partly because their presence reinforced locals' self-image as more European or "whiter" than their regional neighbors. Interestingly, these expats, similar to US policymakers, readily embraced Costa Rica's exceptionalist narrative to affirm their identities as individuals drawn to a more peaceful and egalitarian society. For many US citizens arriving in the 1960s and 1970s—decades marked by social unrest in the United States over the Vietnam War and Civil Rights—Costa Rica represented a society that seemingly mirrored many of the political ideals they cherished, without the domestic turmoil and foreign conflicts.

Shragai's *Cold War Paradise* then provides a crucial reexamination of the dynamics between US expatriates and local populations in Costa Rica during the Cold War. By shifting the focus from macro-level geopolitical and economic factors to the lived experiences of ordinary individuals, she reveals how the narratives of these lifestyle migrants intersected with and were influenced by Costa Rica's prevailing national identity mythology. Her research uncovers the complexities of privilege and belonging, illustrating how US citizens, despite their financial advantages, often resisted full integration into Costa Rican society, choosing instead to maintain their identities as "expats." This choice not only highlights the historical neocolonial inequities embedded in United States–Central American relations, but also underscores the ways in which these expatriates' presence reinforced local perceptions of Costa Rican exceptionalism. Ultimately, Shragai's work enriches our understanding of Cold War Central America, illuminating the nuanced interplay of identity, privilege, and migration that characterized this pivotal era.

In his groundbreaking work, *Latin America's Democratic Crusade*, historian Allen Wells calls for a reevaluation of the traditional periodization of the Cold War. He convincingly argues that, even though US policymakers often categorized Latin American leaders and intellectuals into two groups—communists, who opposed US interests, and capitalists, who supported them—this binary framework overlooks a crucial distinction recognized by Latin Americans themselves: the division between democrats and dictators. Wells examines politicians such as Costa Rica's José "Pepe" Figueres, Venezuela's Rómulo Betancourt, Chile's Eduardo Frei, Puerto Rico's Luis Muñoz Marín, and the Dominican Republic's Juan Bosch, all of whom rose to power in the 1940s and 1950s. He asserts that these leaders largely avoided US disfavor because they accepted US hegemony and rejected communism. At the same time, however, most identified as Democratic Socialists, advocating not only for electoral democracy but also for agrarian reform, the

curtailment of exploitative monopolies, and the implementation of social safety nets for the poor.

Moreover, their endeavors to promote democratic development both within their nations and across the region often frustrated US officials and put them at odds with regional dictators such as Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, and Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela. Wells highlights how these strongmen not only repressed dissidents within their borders but also leveraged their diplomatic corps and alliances with other authoritarian leaders to monitor and silence troublesome exiles and other dissenting voices. These autocrats actively sought—and often secured—support from US officials, not only to bolster their regimes but also to eliminate political adversaries.

Wells notes that these democrats' efforts between 1952 and 1961 led to the ousting or resignation of 10 dictators in the region, marking a significant achievement during this period. However, the subsequent decades saw a resurgence of dictatorship.

The first part of Wells's book explores the rise of student movements in the 1920s, which developed into a transnational pro-democratic and anti-imperialist campaign aimed at deposing dictators and protesting US military interventions in countries such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Despite facing setbacks, these young activists laid the groundwork for reformist politicians who began gaining power in the 1940s, promoting electoral democracy. Wells illustrates how these leaders made significant strides in the 1950s and 1960s, only to be met with renewed dictatorship and US interventionism following the Cuban Revolution and the rise of Castro-inspired guerrilla groups. His work has important implications for understanding regional political alliances and fractures that do not always align with US Cold War perspectives, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean.

Wells devotes substantial attention to analyzing Guatemala's 1954 military coup, challenging the traditional interpretation of this event as a fully United States-hatched operation, revealing the critical roles played by both democratic leaders and regional dictators in the events leading to Jacobo Árbenz's ousting. This reinterpretation carries important implications for our understanding of what is commonly recognized as Latin America's first Cold War confrontation. Wells explains that the original plan to unseat Árbenz was devised in 1951 by Anastasio Somoza and an attorney for the United Fruit Company, predating Árbenz's agrarian reform law, which is often depicted as the catalyst for the coup. Somoza secured backing for the coup from Trujillo, Batista, Pérez Jiménez, and Peru's Manuel Odría, along with support from the Harry Truman administration. Although initial coup plans were put on hold by the United States following Somoza's leak of the plot, the Dwight Eisenhower administration resumed discussions for a coup in 1953.

By that time, Wells notes, Árbenz's government had few allies. Democratic leaders in the region, including José Figueres and Rómulo Betancourt, expressed concerns to US officials and other regional leaders about Árbenz's alignment with the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT) and leftist labor groups. Although these democrats did not view Árbenz as a communist or an ally of the Soviets, they feared that his reliance on Guatemalan communists could lead him toward totalitarianism. Despite these reservations, Figueres opposed US intervention in favor of a coordinated Central American initiative aimed at encouraging Árbenz to either resign or remove the communists from his government. However, this strategy gained little support, as Figueres was reluctant to cooperate with Somoza.

Notably, Wells highlights that Figueres warned US officials that, if the coup bore clear US fingerprints, the backlash in the region would be significant, and indeed, it was. The coup transformed Árbenz into a hero for the region's anti-imperialists and anti-US protests erupted in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Havana, Mexico City, Montevideo, Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, and Tegucigalpa. Wells argues that historians have often overlooked the fact that Latin Americans interpreted the coup as disheartening evidence that the United States preferred working with dictators over democrats, and many saw the threat of Soviet penetration as far less pressing than the growth of dictatorship.

The long-term consequences for Figueres, Betancourt, Frei, Muñoz, Bosch, and other democratic leaders of the period were profound. Even before the coup, these moderate politicians recognized that the United States-backed coup placed them in a no-win situation. If they criticized Árbenz's policies or his reliance on communists in his government, they risked alienating anti-imperialists and nationalists who opposed US intervention. Conversely, if they openly condemned US imperialism, they faced the potential disfavor of US American officials. In this precarious landscape, many moderate democrats chose silence. Young leftists throughout the region, many of whom were supporters of these democrats, became deeply disillusioned by the silence and complacency of their leaders. In the following years, many of these individuals would be inspired by the Cuban Revolution, abandoning the ideals of the more conservative democratic parties to advocate for more radical change.

Wells's *Latin America's Democratic Crusade* both reframes our understanding of the Cold War in Latin America and illuminates the complex interplay between local democrats and dictators within a broader geopolitical context. By highlighting the resistance of moderate democratic leaders against both US intervention and regional autocracy, Wells reveals the nuanced political landscape that shaped Latin America's mid-20th-century history. His analysis underscores the need for future Central American historians to consider the diverse motivations and actions of Latin American leaders, rather than relying solely on the binary Cold War framework, thereby enriching our comprehension of this pivotal era.

The five works examined here collectively illustrate a significant evolution in how Central Americanists interpret the Cold War and the crucial roles played by diverse local and international actors in shaping key events in the isthmus. Even as each author acknowledges the profound impact of US political, military, and economic interventions on the region's development, they draw on newly available archival sources and, in several cases, oral histories to complicate the traditional narrative of US empire in the region. Their work highlights how Central American politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens, as well as US and European civilians and activists, influenced Cold War transformations through both significant and subtle actions. In doing so, these works encourage us to recognize the United States as a major player, but not the sole actor, in defining the region's Cold War.

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