



Hal Brands. *Latin America's Cold War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 385 S. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05528-5.



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H. Brands: Latin America's Cold War

This book presents an integral and comprehensive history of the Cold War in Latin America. Rather than a simple East-West confrontation, the Cold War in the region was a composite deployment of different conflicts: internal social tensions, US hegemonic pressures and the anti-imperialistic response, the geo-politics of great-power competition (mostly involving Washington, Moscow and Habana), and the spillover of decolonization. The convergence of these conflicts manifested itself in cycles of revolt and repression that produced inordinate amounts of violence all across the region. This book offers a most comprehensive view of political violence in the region, as it was influenced by the dynamic of the Cold War. The author is to be commended for his effort at synthesis and the balanced treatment of a variety of subjects involving revolution and counter-revolution. It would be difficult to find a more complete history of Cold-War events in Latin America.

Chapter 2 deals with great power and Cuban influence on Latin American politics. It convincingly shows that Washington's attempt to modernize the economies of Latin America through the Alliance for Progress ended

in general disappointment. Modernization theory, upon which much of the Alliance programs relied, clashed against the hard realities of the region: well-entrenched social inequalities, political conservatism, and the immaturity of the region's democracies. Washington's use of counter-insurgency programs, while successful at preventing the emergence of a second Cuba in the region, fostered sentiments of anti-Americanism that played in favor of the Left. The attempt by Cuba and Moscow to export revolution to Latin America failed miserably, as the foquista doctrine proved out of touch with the realities of social struggles in the region. Latin American governments reacted against Cuban meddling with their internal affairs. Guevara's theory of the primacy of violence to create the conditions for revolution led dozens of guerrilla movements into a no-end road.

Chapter 3 examines the political polarization of the 1960s. The decade witnessed the emergence of growing fears about revolution, a deep sense of economic deprivation and social injustice among the masses, and a rising tide of anti-Americanism. While the Cuban revolution created a myriad of guerrillas attempting to spread rev-

olutionary violence, no successful revolution took place in the region. On the other hand, the National Security Doctrine took root among the militaries of the region producing various coups intended to prevent the spread of "subversion" and to restore social and political order. The top-down repression played within an environment of widespread political mobilization, where students, industrial workers, and peasants rose in protest trying to correct long-standing inequities in the distribution of income and wealth. The peak in student and labor protest occurred in 1968-69. The author emphasizes the influence of Liberation Theology in giving a new hope to peasants and the urban poor fighting against social and economic injustice.

Chapter 4 presents the cycle of revolution and counter-revolution that characterized the early 1970s. While the radical Left organized more powerful guerrilla movements (such as Tupamaros, Montoneros, and MIR) focused on urban-based struggles, these attempts were countered by repressive military regimes that implemented systematic repression against leftist sympathizers. In fact, the author argues, most of the guerrilla organizations were dismantled and defeated before the military coups. In the end, in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay military coups between 1973 and 1976 ensured the defeat of guerrilla organizations and the disarming of revolutionary hopes. The new right extremists who came to power (the juntas presided by right-wing generals such as Videla or Pinochet) launched ambitious programs of economic reform and ideological re-alignment. The counter-revolution centered on the Southern Cone, where generals thought they were fighting a "Third World War," and winning it. Guerrilla leaders, such as Firmenich, Marighella, and Sendic were equally convinced that an all-out war against imperialism and the military would lead their nations into a socialist future. Initial success in spectacular guerrilla actions soon gave way to military defeat and popular disenchantment with their cause.

Chapter 5 considers an issue generally overlooked in the history of US-Latin American relations in the Cold War period: the so-called "Latin American diplomatic challenge" to U.S. hemispheric preeminence. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, leaders from different ideological persuasions - Allende in Chile, Velasco Alvarado in Peru, Echeverría in Mexico, Perez in Venezuela - called into question Washington's hegemony in the hemisphere. They rejected the primacy of Cold War visions, embraced some of the dictates of dependency theory, and moved towards the Non-Allied Movement. Considering the US

weakened by the Vietnam syndrome, these leaders called for a new balance between North and South. Washington had to withstand the nationalization of US properties without being able to impose retributions. This counter-hegemonic movement was short-lived, for soon the region's momentary economic and financial stability was disturbed by growing indebtedness and IMF (International Monetary Fund) meddling.

Chapter 6 is almost wholly devoted to the analysis of the Nicaraguan revolution (1979). Twenty years after the Cuban revolution, despite CIA predictions in the early 1960s, this was the only true Marxist revolution to materialize. (The author considers the "Chilean road to socialism" a sort of reformist social change, with little chances of success.) Long-term oppression and marginalization of the urban and rural masses, intensified by the enduring dictatorship of the Somoza dynasty, created the conditions for a social revolution in Nicaragua. The author shows how the different factions within the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), under the pressure from Cuba, managed to attain unity, and how the Sandinistas were able to mount a successful popular insurrection that accompanied their rise to power. For quite different reasons, peasants, students, and urban workers joined the struggle. Soon, however, cornered by the US-sponsored contras and by domestic opposition (among them the Miskito indigenous peoples), the initial support of the revolution eroded and the Sandinistas responded by reducing avenues for political participation. President Reagan's decisive move to use covert activities and even Argentine military trainers proved successful not only in undermining the Nicaraguan revolution, but also in avoiding the success of similar movements in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Chapter 7 moves to the 1980s. After the Nicaraguan revolution the center of gravity shifted to Guatemala and El Salvador, where civil war devastated these countries. The author presents this unprecedented violence as the culmination of the Cold War in the region. In both countries rural guerrillas had operated since the 1970s. In 1981-83 Rios Mont launched a fierce counter-insurgency that wiped out entire indigenous villages in Guatemala. The government organized civil patrols to prevent peasants from cooperating with the guerrillas. In El Salvador, five guerrilla groups eventually merged into the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional), a front dedicated to a prolonged people's war. Starting in 1979 death squads carried violence against labor and agrarian activists, student groups and opposition politicians. In March 1980 they killed Bishop Romero as he

concluded a mass.

Chapter 8 deals with the end of Latin America's Cold War. The debt crisis of the early 1980s discredited military regimes and brought about an era of democratization in South America, followed by neo-liberal reforms in the early 1990s. Many countries abandoned the ISI (Import-substituting Industrialization) growth model, reduced public spending, privatized state-owned industries, lifted trade barriers and let their currencies to float. In both regards, results proved disappointing. While democratic governments were still fraught with authoritarian features, the neo-liberal reforms failed to reduce poverty or socio-economic inequalities. However, these developments put a halt to the Cold War. Three decades of competition between East and West over political and economic arrangements ended with a victory for the United States and its allies. Free markets, electoral competition, and democratic procedures were now in vogue, while guerrillas and generals seemed no longer necessary elements in the political landscape.

One of the virtues of the book is its overall balance. In a region where the narration of these events still provides bifurcated histories - one interpretation from the left, another quite different from the right - , it is refreshing to see an impartial, non-partisan view of events. The author makes an effort to present revolution and counter-revolution as forces that balance each other and, at times, interact with one another. The escalation of guerrilla violence generated repressive responses from domestic governments. These actions, though disproportionate at times, reflected the evaluation made by actors of the threat posed by revolution. The external superpowers (the United States and the USSR) are portrayed in the same way; as forces that deepen or relax their commitment in the region in response to the actions of the geo-political enemy. A detached condensation of myriads of conflicts and forces renders the book a valuable reading material for students.

Latin America's Cold War promises to account for a convergence of conflicts of different nature; some of them internal to each nation, others related to the superpower dynamic, others emerging from US interventions and the reaction to it. A fourth strand of events, namely the process of decolonization and the emergence of the Third World, is not so clearly developed in the narrative. There are few instances in which events in Africa or Asia seem to have impacted upon the conflicts and the violence in Latin America. The US retreat from Vietnam appears to have an indirect influence, presenting a more

favorable international scenario for revolutionaries and anti-imperialist diplomats. And occasionally, it is mentioned that Cuba financed guerrilla warfare in Angola. Other than that, Latin America appears to be isolated from the great history of decolonization. Guerrilla leaders tried, once and again, to connect their struggles with the anti-colonial struggles of Algeria and Vietnam, but there was little substance to these claims and connections.

Another important virtue of the book is its attempt to cover the most important events and processes pertaining to the subject. The author achieves this objective with high marks. The problem is that, in accounting for so many guerrilla movements, diplomatic stratagems, counter-insurgency activities, and US government agencies' reports, there is something that seems to have slipped through the cracks: the question of the rationality of all that violence. The logic of enemies and friends was in many instances sustained by apocalyptic visions of the imminent future that are today difficult to explain or believe. There is a great disproportion between the amount of violence unleashed and the requirements of the politics of the moment. Did Rios Mont need to wipe out 100,000 to 200,000 Guatemalans to make his point? The author writes: "These conflicting extremisms did not exist independently of one another, but rather interacted in a dialectical relationship that increased the intensity of both." (p. 128) Can a mechanic of action and reaction be applied to so much irrational behavior?

Certain topics or discussions are going to be controversial; such as when the author reduces Mexican students' activism to petty-bourgeois boredom. (The author writes: "For bored, frustrated students, political protest offered one of few apparent avenues for a meaningful release of energy", p. 82). Or when he asks the reader to believe that Salvadoran and Guatemalan peasants accepted the "protection" of self-defense patrols without protestation. Or when he argues that speeches by Latin American diplomats posed a "serious challenge to US hegemony" in the region. Or when he asserts the true democratic beliefs of Ronald Reagan. These are few controversial statements in a book otherwise full of balance and common sense. One assertion, however, will not pass unnoticed. The author contends that the National Security Doctrine did not originate in the United States, as it is usually claimed. That Latin American military repressors came to know about counter-insurgency strategies from French and German officers. That before Kennedy made counter-insurgency a focal point of US-Latin American relations, many Latin American military officers viewed their nations threatened by Marxist extremists. In other

words, that the School of the Americas was not an important instrument for the transmission southward of counter-insurgency strategy. This is a strong contention that will certainly meet critical responses.

Latin America's Cold War is a well-written and thoroughly-researched book about one of the most pernicious set of conflicts in the region: the violent confronta-

tions between Left and Right about the social, economic, and political arrangements of their nations. A brilliant achievement, the book will prove in time to be mandatory reading in courses attempting to make sense of contemporary Latin America. Assembling together a multiplicity of events, processes, and beliefs, the book makes a synthesis of the region's tragedy since the post-war.

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