

United States Interventions

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What For?

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In the slightly less than a hundred years from 1898 to 1994, the U.S. government has intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times. That amounts to once every 28 months for an entire century (see table).

Direct intervention occurred in 17 of the 41 cases. These incidents involved the use of U.S. military forces, intelligence agents or local citizens employed by U.S. government agencies. In another 24 cases, the U.S. government played an indirect role. That is, local actors played the principal roles, but either would not have acted or would not have succeeded without encouragement from the U.S. government.

While direct interventions are easily identified and copiously documented, identifying indirect interventions requires an exercise in historical judgment. The list of 41 includes only cases where, in the author's judgment, the incumbent government would likely have survived in the absence of U.S. hostility. The list ranges from obvious cases to close calls. An example of an obvious case is the decision, made in the Oval Office in January 1963, to incite the Guatemalan army to overthrow the (dubiously) elected government of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes in order to prevent an open competitive election that might have been won by left-leaning former President Juan José Arévalo. A less obvious case is that of the Chilean military coup against the government of President Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. The Allende government had plenty of domestic opponents eager to see it deposed. It is included in this list because U.S. opposition to a coup (rather than encouragement) would most likely have enabled Allende to continue in office until new elections.

The 41 cases do not include incidents in which the United States sought to depose a Latin American government, but failed in the attempt. The most famous such case was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. Also absent from the list are numerous cases in which the U.S. government acted decisively to forestall a coup d'état or otherwise protect an incumbent regime from being overthrown.

Overthrowing governments in Latin America has never been exactly routine for the United States. However, the option to depose a sitting government has appeared on the U.S. president's desk with remarkable frequency over the past century. It is no doubt still there, though the frequency with which the U.S. president has used this option has fallen rapidly since the end of the Cold War.

Though one may quibble about cases, the big debates—both in the public and among historians and social scientists—have centered on motives and causes. In nearly every case, U.S. officials cited U.S. security interests, either as determinative or as a principal motivation. With hindsight, it is now possible to dismiss most these claims as implausible. In many cases, they were understood as necessary for generating public and congressional support, but not taken seriously by the key decision makers. The United States did not face a significant military threat from Latin America at any time in the 20th century. Even in the October 1962 missile crisis, the Pentagon did not believe that the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba altered the global balance of nuclear terror. It is unlikely that any significant threat would have materialized if the 41 governments deposed by the United States had remained in office until voted out or overturned without U.S. help.

In both the United States and Latin America, economic interests are often seen as the underlying cause of U.S. interventions. This hypothesis has two variants. One cites corruption and the other blames capitalism. The corruption hypothesis contends that U.S. officials order interventions to protect U.S. corporations. The best evidence for this version comes from the decision to depose the elected government of Guatemala in 1954. Except for President Dwight Eisenhower, every significant decision maker in this case had a family, business or professional tie to the United Fruit Company, whose interests were adversely affected by an agrarian reform and other policies of the incumbent government. Nonetheless, in this as in every other case involving U.S. corporate interests, the U.S. government would probably not have resorted to intervention in the absence of other concerns.

The capitalism hypothesis is a bit more sophisticated. It holds that the United States intervened not to save individual companies but to save the private enterprise system, thus benefiting all U.S. (and Latin American) companies with a stake in the region. This is a more plausible argument, based on repeated declarations by U.S. officials who seldom missed an opportunity to praise free enterprise. However, capitalism was not at risk in the overwhelming majority of U.S. interventions, perhaps even in none of them. So this ideological preference, while real, does not help explain why the United States intervened. U.S. officials have also expressed a preference for democratic regimes, but ordered interventions to overthrow elected governments more often than to restore democracy in Latin America. Thus, this preference also fails to carry much explanatory power.

An economist might approach the thorny question of causality not by asking what consumers or investors say about their preferences, but what their actions can help us to infer about them. An economist's approach might also help in another way, by distinguishing between supply and demand. A look at the supply side suggests that interventions will occur more often where they do not cost much, either directly in terms of decision makers' time and resources, or in terms of damage to significant interests. On the demand side, two factors seem to have been crucial in tipping decision makers toward intervention: domestic politics and global strategy.

Domestic politics seems to be a key factor in most of these cases. For example, internal documents show that President Lyndon Johnson ordered U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965 not because of any plausible threat to the United States, but because he felt threatened by Republicans in Congress. Political competition within the United States accounts for the disposition of many U.S. presidents to order interventions.

The second key demand-side factor could be called the global strategy effect. The United States in the 20th century defined its strategic interests in global terms. This was particularly true after World War II when the United States moved rapidly to project its power into regions of the earth on the periphery of the Communist states where it had never had a presence before. In the case of Latin America, where the United States faced no foreseeable military threat, policy planners did nonetheless identify potential future threats. This was especially true in the 1960s, after the Cuban Revolution. The United States helped to depose nine of the governments that fell to military rulers in the 1960s, about one every 13 months and more than in any other decade. Curiously, however, we now know that U.S. decision makers were repeatedly assured by experts in the CIA and other intelligence gathering agencies that, in the words of a 1968 National Intelligence Estimate, “In no case do insurgencies pose a serious short run threat...revolution seems unlikely in most Latin American countries within the next few years.” Few challenged the idea that leftist regimes would pose a security threat to the United States. threat... revolution seems unlikely in most Latin American countries

Thus, in a region where intervention was not very costly, and even major failures unlikely to damage U.S. interests, the combination of domestic political competition and potential future threats—even those with a low probability of ever materializing—appear to explain most of the 20th century US interventions.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that U.S. interventions did not serve U.S. national interests well. They generated needless resentment in the region and called into question the U.S. commitment to democracy and rule of law in international affairs. The downward trend in the past decade and half is a positive development much to be encouraged.

CHRONICLING INTERVENTIONS

U.S. DIRECT INTERVENTIONS

Military/CIA activity that changed governments

COUNTRY	YEAR	EVENT SUMMARY
Cuba	1898-1902	Spanish-American War
	1906-09	Ousts elected Pres. Palma; occupation regime
	1917-23	U.S. reoccupation, gradual withdrawal

Dominican Rep	1916-24	U.S. occupation
	1961	Assassination of Pres. Trujillo
	1965	U.S. Armed Forces occupy Sto Domingo
Grenada	1983	U.S. Armed Forces occupy island; oust government
Guatemala	1954	C.I.A.-organized armed force ousts Pres. Arbenz
Haiti	1915-34	U.S. occupation
	1994	U.S. troops restore constitutional government
Mexico	1914	Veracruz occupied; US allows rebels to buy arms
Nicaragua	1910	Troops to Corinto, Bluefields during revolt
	1912-25	U.S. occupation
	1926-33	U.S. occupation
	1981-90	Contra war; then support for opposition in election
Panama	1903-14	U.S. Troops secure protectorate, canal
	1989	U.S. Armed Forces occupy nation

U.S. INDIRECT INTERVENTION

Government/ regime changes in which U.S. is decisive

COUNTRY	YEAR	EVENT SUMMARY
Bolivia	1944	Coup uprising overthrow Pres. Villaroel
	1963	Military coup ousts elected Pres. Paz Estenssoro
	1971	Military coup ousts Gen. Torres
Brazil	1964	Military coup ousts elected Pres. Goulart
Chile	1973	Coup ousts elected Pres. Allende.
	1989-90	Aid to anti-Pinochet opposition
Cuba	1933	U.S. abandons support for Pres. Machado
	1934	U.S. sponsors coup by Col. Batista to oust Pres. Grau

Dominican Rep.	1914	U.S. secures ouster of Gen. José Bordas
	1963	Coup ousts elected Pres. Bosch
El Salvador	1961	Coup ousts reformist civil-military junta
	1979	Coup ousts Gen. Humberto Romero
	1980	U.S. creates and aids new Christian Demo junta
Guatemala	1963	U.S. supports coup vs elected Pres. Ydígoras
	1982	U.S. supports coup vs Gen. Lucas García
	1983	U.S. supports coup vs Gen. Rios Montt
Guyana	1953	CIA aids strikes; Govt. is ousted
Honduras	1963	Military coups ousts elected Pres. Morales
Mexico	1913	U.S. Amb. H. L. Wilson organizes coup v Madero
Nicaragua	1909	Support for rebels vs Zelaya govt
	1979	U.S. pressures Pres. Somoza to leave
Panama	1941	U.S supports coup ousting elected Pres. Arias
	1949	U.S. supports coup ousting constitutional govt of VP Chanís
	1969	U.S. supports coup by Gen. Torrijos

See also: U.S. Foreign Policy