9.

REACTION

After the Cuban Revolution exploded like a flare in the night sky, a beacon of hope for some and a signal of danger for others, the Cold War came to Latin America in full force. The Cuban government did what it could—not very much, offering training but rarely money or arms—to aid Marxist revolutionaries in other countries of the region. Soviet Russia never played a major role outside Cuba. Still, the US State Department saw any Marxist revolutionary movement as a Soviet proxy force. US policy encouraged a violent counterrevolutionary reaction that spread over the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

Admittedly, Marxism and the Cuban example were very prominent; that was no figment of the US State Department's imagination. Furthermore, Latin American Marxists did believe that Soviet Russia was on their side. But images of the USSR figured little in the appeal of Latin American Marxism. Almost never did the Marxist revolutionaries of Latin America organize because of Russian prompting or depend on Russian aid, much less operate on Russian instructions. There simply were no Soviet proxy guerrilla forces in Latin America equivalent to those created by the US government. Nationalism remained the bedrock of revolutionary feeling. Among most Latin

Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The return of *niños desaparecidos*, "disappeared children," is what these Buenos Aires protestors demanded, day after day, in front of the presidential palace during the 1980s. Carrying banners and poster-size photos of the children whom they wanted back alive, the courageous mothers had to settle more often for news of their children's abduction and clandestine murder by the Argentine military during its "dirty war" against Marxist guerrillas called Montoneros. *Photograph by Enrique Shore, Woodfin Camp and Associates Inc.*

1964	1973	1978	1984	1990
Military coup in Brazil	Military coup in Chile	Puebla conference of Latin American bishops	*I, Rigoberta Menchú* published	Sandinista electoral defeat

American revolutionaries of the day, to accept Marxism meant basically one thing: to side with the weak and impoverished masses against the rich minority and the US multinational corporations.

On the other side stood those who thought revolution spelled disaster. Latin Americans took this position for various reasons. The upper class and most of the middle class were logically anticommunist because they feared losing their privileged status. But traditional patronage networks involved many poor people in the anticommunist cause as well. Sometimes, the anticommunists successfully branded Marxist ideas as foreign to Latin America by tirelessly exaggerating the international connections of revolutionary movements. And after all, Marxism, like liberalism in the early 1800s, really was an imported ideology, and poor and culturally conservative people—of whom there are many in Latin America, especially in the countryside—might not think that radical university students spoke for them.

NATIONAL SECURITY DOCTRINE

The most important US anticommunist allies, by far, were the armed forces of Latin America. The working alliance between the US military and Latin American armed forces, dating from World War II, had become an explicitly anticommunist alliance after the war. It involved permanent US military aid for Latin American armies, as well as training at the US military's School of the Americas, where the basic curriculum could be summed up as counterinsurgency—how to fight guerrillas. The overall logic of the anticommunist alliance, sometimes called "national security doctrine," ran as follows: Latin American armed forces are key US allies in defense of the "free world," and counterinsurgency is their special role. The strategic naval and air power of the United States will handle

any communist invaders from outside the hemisphere. Latin American armies, for their part, should turn their guns inward against "the internal enemies of freedom": revolutionary organizers in factories, poor neighborhoods, and universities.

It is easy to see what Latin American generals liked about their alliance with the US military. The US alliance increased the power of Latin American armies within their own countries. Furthermore, national security doctrine offered a glorious mission—defending the "free world" or even "Western civilization"—and this mission won them rich and powerful friends as a fringe benefit.

The creation of the military alliances was complemented in the 1960s by a new US aid policy. In a clear reaction to the Cuban Revolution, US President John F. Kennedy announced—belatedly, in 1961—a sort of Marshall Plan for Latin America, to be called the Alliance for Progress. The basic idea of the Alliance for Progress was exactly that of the Marshall Plan: to reduce revolutionary pressures by stimulating economic development and political reform. "Those who make reform impossible will make revolution inevitable," declared Kennedy, in reference to the danger of communism in Latin America. US aid to Latin America increased. But making substantial changes in whole societies is harder, and much more expensive, than supplying guns and counterinsurgency training. The Alliance for Progress quickly ran out of steam. By the 1970s, Latin American generals believed that the region would inevitably fall to communist revolution unless they prevented it.

For military officers steeped in national security doctrine, the Cuban Revolution had been a call to battle stations, and, in their view, the situation grew more dire as the 1960s advanced. Spray-painted revolutionary slogans seemed to cover every available wall. Marxism was becoming the predominant political philosophy among Latin American artists, social scientists, and nationalist intellectuals in general. The 1960s New Cinema

of Brazil and other countries gained critical acclaim with gritty films designed, according to one filmmaker, "to make the people aware of their own misery." Revolutionary Cuba's upstart film industry soon became one of the best and most influential in Latin America. The vogue of Marxist thought could be felt with particular intensity at public universities. A novelistic "Boom" had made Latin American literature famous throughout the world, and its prestigious authors spoke for revolution. Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez, for example, traveled often to Cuba and shared a warm friendship with Fidel Castro. The García Márquez novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), arguably the best-known Latin American novel of the century, climaxes with a massacre, as government machine guns fire into crowds of workers on strike against a US banana company. The real event, involving the United Fruit Company, took place in 1928 near the Colombian author's home. Other Boom authors, such as Mexico's Carlos Fuentes and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa, shared the general admiration for revolutionary Cuba in the 1960s. Even the Catholic Church, long a pillar of tradition and hierarchy, developed a dissenting wing that aligned itself with the revolutionaries, as we have seen. When radios played the Beatles singing "Back in the USSR you don't know how lucky you are," even the youth counterculture seemed, in military eyes, to conspire against national security.

Perhaps a siege mentality explains the gruesome violence committed from the 1960s to the 1980s by Latin American militaries against their "internal enemies." Whatever explains it, military use of secret kidnapping, torture, and murder as counterinsurgency techniques became widespread. With the "free world" depending on them to combat the "red tide," Latin American militaries targeted anyone suspected of sympathizing with the guerrillas—student protesters, labor leaders, peasant organizers—snatching them off the streets and "disappearing" them forever without legal record. "This is war," explained the

generals. They were doing what they had to, they said, to defeat communist guerrillas. By the 1960s, these were often urban guerrillas. Urban guerrillas lived and fought in big cities, where they could menace the government, strike at army headquarters, or kidnap and ransom an industrialist to finance their operations. By the same token, with their enemies literally around the corner, urban guerrillas were extremely vulnerable. Their only protection was secrecy. To find guerrilla hideouts, Latin American security forces subjected prisoners to a variety of horrors, including repeated rape over a period of weeks, electric shocks to nipples and testicles, permanent blindfolding, and psychological torment such as being forced to witness the torture of a loved one. Many in Latin America believe that such techniques were taught at the US School of the Americas. One thing is certain: National security doctrine maintained the climate of emergency used by torturers to justify their acts.

US policy called for democracy but helped trigger dictatorship. National security doctrine encouraged Latin American armed forces to take an increasingly active role in national life, promoting economic development and public health, for example. As they gained this kind of experience, some officers began to consider civilian politicians an unnecessary hindrance. Civil liberties such as the right to denounce torture hindered the military's freedom to smash its enemies by any means necessary. To save democracy from the Marxists, the generals destroyed it themselves in a series of preemptive strikes.

The government of one Latin American country after another was now taken over by executive committees composed of generals and admirals. These were called *juntas*, like the provisional governments founded in Spanish America after Napoleon imprisoned the king of Spain in 1808. The military juntas of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s tried to keep things under collective institutional control, avoiding the emergence of an

unpredictable Perón. The nonpersonalist nature of the new military dictatorships led political scientists to speak of "bureaucratic authoritarianism." By the mid-1970s, a plague of bureaucratic authoritarianism had swept through South America, and constitutional civilian governments survived in only a few countries.

MILITARY RULE

Brazil offers a perfect example. Brazilian military leaders, who had fought alongside US forces during World War II, enjoyed close ties to the United States. The US response to the Cuban Revolution put the Brazilian military on "red" alert, and the generals saw danger everywhere. To their dismay, even the decidedly unrevolutionary Brazilian president, elected in 1960, pinned a medal on Che Guevara to signal diplomatic independence from the United States. This president eventually resigned, but his vice president, who was on a visit to Red China at the time of the resignation, was even worse in military eyes. Limiting his powers, they watched his every move.

They did not like what they saw. The new president was João Goulart, a political protégé of Getúlio Vargas. Labor minister in the last Vargas government, Goulart had inherited leadership of the Vargas constituency, Brazil's nationalist coalition of the urban middle and working classes. But that coalition had unraveled after the Cuban Revolution, when frightened middle-class voters bolted to the right. So Goulart redoubled his outreach toward urban workers, his rhetoric sounding more radical each day. Foreign investors feared expropriation. In a climate of sharp and unpredictable political confrontation, the economy stalled completely.

Meanwhile, the land-hungry Peasant Leagues of desperately impoverished northeastern Brazil began to admire the Cuban

model, and Brazilian landowners resolved to fight land reform tooth and nail. The military feared that Goulart might build a new revolutionary coalition of workers and peasants, capable of steamrollering all resistance. So, with the knowledge and collaboration of the US ambassador and the US military attaché in Brazil, and with US naval support offshore standing by, Brazilian generals seized control of the country. The US ambassador interpreted the coup as the "single most decisive victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century." But the Brazilian military ruled undemocratically for twenty years following their 1964 coup.

Brazil had no tradition of military rule per se. So military leaders carefully maintained the outward appearance of constitutional government. If laws got in their way, they decreed a change in the laws. They decreed that their enemies had no political rights for ten years. They decreed that there were only two legal political parties, which Brazilians joked about as the "Yes" party and the "Yes, sir" party. Opposition emerged anyway. Before dissolving the congress, an unconstitutional act, the generals decreed amendments that let them dissolve it legally. When urban guerrillas organized in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the military attacked them—and anybody around them or suspected of supporting them—with out-of-uniform "death squads." Meanwhile, they kept meticulous files on official prisoners, files that even recorded their interrogation under torture. Eventually, an archbishop sympathetic to liberation theology and basic human rights was able to compile copies of these files to document military abuses.

The Brazilian military had various currents within it. Moderate constitutionalists were in control from 1964 to 1967, but as protest mounted, hard-liners with more dictatorial inclinations took over. The hard line dominated the government from 1968 to 1974, after which popular protest temporarily subsided

and the regime relaxed somewhat. Along with generals who took their cues from the United States, there were right-wing nationalists who talked freely of making Brazil into a world power. The nationalists paid special attention to road-building and development projects in the Amazon basin, through which Brazil's borders run, believing that otherwise, the country might lose this vast territory.

The Brazilian military had a nationalist commitment to industrialization, too. It drove relentlessly toward a new level of heavy industrialization, the manufacture of durable consumer goods. Middle-class protest subsided in the early 1970s, partly because the economy had begun to grow explosively. For a few years, the government spoke proudly of a Brazilian economic "miracle." Growth it certainly was; a miracle it was not. The military government had created conditions in which new industries could thrive at the expense of Brazil's poor majority. Not tied to a broad electoral coalition, the military could hold down wages and "disappear" anyone who complained. It could attract international capital with a "safe climate for foreign investment," meaning low wages, no strikes, few restrictions, and no expropriations. And it could freely channel resources into developmental priorities like mining, transportation, steel production, and oil refining.

Heavier industries used less of Brazil's abundant unskilled labor, and their products were aimed mostly at a middle-class market. Therefore, most people in Brazil, where the middle class is a minority, benefited little or not at all from the "miracle" of the early 1970s. Military policies put more money and credit not in the hands of the poor who most needed it, but in the hands of better-off people likely to buy cars, electronics, and domestic appliances. In a country half-malnourished, the malnourished half got only one tenth of the income gains between 1964 and 1974. Instead, the bulk of those gains went to the richest tenth of Brazilian society. Some miracle! The cake had to rise, said the generals, before it could be sliced. But they really had no plans for distributing this prosperity. Instead, they pursued their vision of Brazilian greatness by constructing some of the world's biggest, and most environmentally devastating, hydroelectric dams—also highways, bridges, and airports.

Then the miracle was over. Oil prices had been rising steeply since the early 1970s, and Brazil imported a lot of oil. For a while, sudden oil profits, the so-called petrodollars, flowed from oil-rich countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq into international banks, then out of the banks as low-interest, short-term loans into oil-poor countries like Brazil. The Brazilian military government borrowed billions of petrodollars to maintain its developmental drive. They also borrowed petrodollars to import expensive petroleum, in a vicious circle. A more creative reaction was the program to make cane-alcohol fuel for cars, fuel that eventually powered a quarter to a third of Brazilian motor vehicles. Then, in the late 1970s, the second shoe dropped when international interest rates rose dramatically. Brazil's foreign debt mushroomed. By the early 1980s, Brazil had the world's largest foreign debt.

Brazilian industries now produced cars, buses, and trucks with all-Brazilian components. However, when the value of Brazil's manufactured exports surpassed the value of its coffee exports in the early 1970s—a historic moment for economic nationalist dreams—it happened partly because so many Brazilians could not afford the items being exported. Ironically, half-malnourished Brazil was now one of the world's leading exporters of food. Beginning in 1978, massive strikes of workers in São Paulo, the country's industrial heart, announced the revival of popular opposition to the military's regressive social policies. After saving Brazil from the "Cuban threat" very early on, the military had used economic growth to justify its

continued authoritarian rule. Now, in the early 1980s, with an economic meltdown and an awakening opposition on its hands, the military was finally ready to bow out.

The legacy of military rule was worse, much worse, in Argentina and Uruguay, scene of a "dirty war" fought by the armed forces against urban guerrillas. Argentina and Uruguay could not be more unlike Brazil at this time, in their high overall standard of living and their unequaled indices of literacy and life expectancy. Yet this did not save them from the crisis unleashed by the Cold War.

Whereas in the early 1960s Brazilian generals were dreading what might happen if industrial workers and peasants joined forces, Argentine generals were dreading what already *had* happened—Perón. The exiled leader was still directing the now outlawed Peronist movement personally, and the industrial workers of Argentina still revered him. Perón had never been a Marxist, but during the Cold War any working-class movement looked suspicious to anticommunist eyes. A few years after ousting Perón in 1955, the Argentine military had stepped aside and allowed civilian rule to resume, but whenever it allowed the Peronists to compete in elections (1962, 1965), the military came hurrying back to annul a Peronist victory. Then, in 1966, two years after the military takeover in Brazil, the Argentine armed forces set up their own version of a bureaucratic authoritarian state, with similar goals: to eliminate the revolutionary threat, hold down wages, and encourage foreign investment. The Argentine military government also mirrored Brazil's official anticommunist repression, but with ghoulish intensity.

Not easily repressed, Argentine revolutionaries drew strength from their Peronist heritage and from deeper socialist and anarchist roots. The Argentine military, on the other hand, did not benefit from economic growth comparable to the Brazilian "miracle" of these years. Without carrots to distribute, it relied on the stick. The killing began in the late 1960s and escalated

through the 1970s, making the Brazilian record of military torture and murder appear child's play by comparison. A number of tenacious Marxist guerrilla movements, their members often young, urban, middle-class, and university educated, fought against the Argentine military government. Many Montoneros, the best known guerrillas, came from Peronist families and still considered themselves Peronists, although their ideology had swerved left. The military responded with death squads that "disappeared" probably more than twenty thousand people, murdered them—after interrogation and torture—and disposed of their bodies secretly, disclaiming any knowledge of their victims' whereabouts.

This dirty war continued even after the military finally permitted Perón's return to Argentina, where he became president in 1973. Sick and in his late seventies, Perón himself now appeared less dangerous than the supposedly Peronist guerrillas. Unfortunately, he died almost immediately. His second wife, Isabel, a former nightclub dancer who had been made vice president, now stepped into the role of Evita, as a political leader in her own right, but she had none of Evita's charisma. The Peronist movement split apart utterly, and Isabel Perón was replaced by a new military president in 1976. Now the counterinsurgency operations moved into homicidal high gear, and the military finally succeeded in exterminating its guerrilla enemies. The generals proudly announced the triumph of "Judeo-Christian civilization," but, as the Argentine economy continued its twenty-year pattern of fits and starts, only Argentina's 1978 home-team victory in the World Cup soccer championship bolstered their popularity. Encouraged by government secrecy, most Argentines tried not to notice the dirty war.

But in the late 1970s, mothers carrying photographs of their "disappeared" children began to protest in the main square of downtown Buenos Aires, the Plaza de Mayo. The military

called them crazy. Not wanting to know the grisly truth, people looked the other way. *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, as they became known, did not give up. They used white scarves embroidered with the names of their disappeared children as a kind of uniform. Middle-aged schoolteachers, social workers, sales clerks—desperate to do something, anything—they became the conscience of a nation, living proof of the military's secret, dirty war. The Argentine military, which loudly proclaimed its mission to defend traditional values such as respect for motherhood, could not touch Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, although it called them *las locas*, "the crazy women of the Plaza." Gradually, the whole world recognized and honored the truth of their crazy accusations. This did not bring their children back, but it was something.

Across the Río de la Plata, in Uruguay, military repression took a similar path. Unlike their Argentine counterparts, the Uruguayan generals had no Peronist movement to fear. Compared with Argentina, Uruguay had been notably placid since World War II. Between 1951 and 1966, Uruguayans even implemented Batlle's earlier proposal for an executive committee in place of a one-man presidency. Despite economic problems, Uruguayan standards of living remained the envy of the hemisphere. Then a group called the Tupamaros tried to precipitate a revolution, just as Che attempted to do in Bolivia.

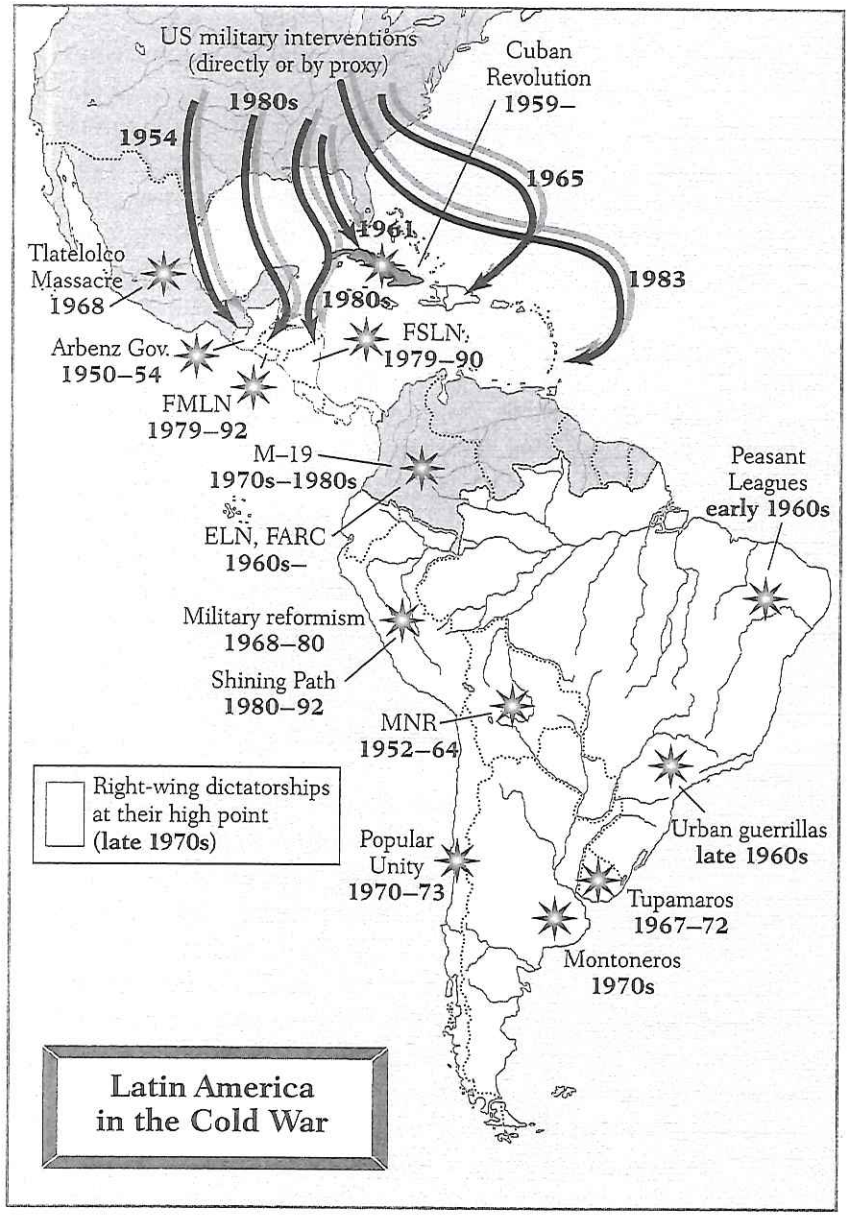
Formed in 1964, the Tupamaro urban guerrilla movement was directly inspired by the example of the Cuban Revolution. The Tupamaros recognized the absence of revolutionary conditions in Uruguay. Not relying on spontaneous combustion, they hoped to spark a hope, set an example, and ignite a larger conflagration in surrounding countries. The Tupamaros carried out daring, brilliantly planned operations designed to impress public opinion. One of their most flamboyant stunts was tunneling into a prison to free captured comrades. In 1967, the Uruguayan president declared martial law to fight the Tupamaros. The

military began a gradual takeover, completed in 1973. It then annihilated the Tupamaros, who, as urban guerrillas in a country with only one city to speak of (Montevideo), were quickly cornered once torture penetrated their cover. The dark curtain of bureaucratic authoritarianism descended on this once privileged society. By the end of the 1970s, Uruguay had more political prisoners, relative to its size, than any other country in the world.

DICTATORSHIP ALMOST EVERYWHERE

The sad fate of stable, democratic Uruguay shows how the Cold War ravaged even countries not prone to insurgency or dictatorship. Chile is the best example of all. No other Latin American country could equal Chile's record of constitutional government. For years, Chilean democracy had negotiated major ideological differences. The Chilean Communist Party was one of the oldest and strongest in the hemisphere. It had participated in electoral coalitions with various other parties of the left since the 1930s. This was the kind of Communist Party that frustrated Che Guevara because it did not advocate armed revolution.

In the Chilean presidential election of 1958, a socialist-communist coalition got almost one third of the vote. Their candidate was Salvador Allende—like Che, a medical doctor and a Marxist. Allende was not an advocate of armed revolution, however. He was committed to Chilean constitutional traditions. In the 1964 election, Allende ran again and did even better, despite the fact that the CIA bankrolled his chief opponent. Alarmed by Allende's popularity, the US State Department made Chile a model of the Alliance for Progress aid program—but to no avail. In the 1970 presidential election, Allende won. The coalition called Popular Unity now had its constitutional chance to show what it meant by "a Chilean road" to socialism.



But ambitious dreams of social transformation—nationalization of Chilean copper, coal, and steel, along with most banks, not to mention land reform—outran Popular Unity's electoral strength. Allende had won the three-way election with a plurality of 36 percent. The two losers, both more conservative than Allende, had garnered 63 percent between them, and they were now united, more or less, in opposition to the Popular Unity government. Allende's enemies found a powerful ally in the CIA, which pumped money to the candidates opposing Popular Unity. The CIA now adopted a "firm and continuing policy," as one agency directive quite explicitly put it, "that Allende be overthrown by a coup." The US State Department used all its leverage to cut off international credit to Allende's government. As Popular Unity imposed price freezes and wage increases to raise the living standards of the Chilean poor, triple-digit inflation roared. Very prosperous Chileans (industrialists, lawyers, physicians, and architects) as well as moderately prosperous ones (shopkeepers and various small entrepreneurs such as independent truckers) fought the initiatives of Popular Unity, sometimes with CIA support.

Meanwhile, the Popular Unity government retained the strong backing of urban workers whose hopes for the future had soared. Many supporters, in fact, thought Popular Unity too timid. Workers moved directly to take over factories that the government had been slow to nationalize. Some urged strong measures against reactionary organizations. But Allende insisted, as always, on working within constitutional restraints. He had some reason for optimism. The expropriation of the copper industry had, in fact, been widely popular, and in the 1971 midterm elections, Popular Unity won by a bigger margin than ever.

Then Chilean army tanks rolled into the streets on 11 September 1973. Refusing safe passage out of the country, Allende went to his office and died under attack by his own armed

THE CHILEAN COUP. Positioned on a rooftop, Chilean soldiers fire on the palace of government during the military overthrow of President Salvador Allende in 1973. The coup leader, General Augusto Pinochet, took over Chile with US support. *OFF/AFP/Getty Images/Newscom.*

forces. Here, in the estimation of US Cold Warriors, was yet another victory for democracy.

The Chilean coup turned out to be the bloodiest such takeover in the history of Latin America. Thousands of supporters of Popular Unity, from folksingers to peasant organizers to university professors, were herded into the Santiago soccer stadium, many never to be heard from again, their bodies shuttled to secret mass graves. As in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, thousands fell victim to a well-organized program of official but clandestine torture and murder. Closing the legislature, the military governed by decree for seventeen years. For most of that time, it had the firm support of the US State Department. The exception was the presidential term of Jimmy Carter, who emphasized human rights as a criterion of US foreign policy.

Although ridiculed as unrealistic by the Cold Warriors, Carter's policy definitely inhibited the military blood fest in Chile and Argentina, and juntas all over Latin America heaved a sigh of relief when Ronald Reagan, a confirmed Cold Warrior, took office as US president in 1980.

The Chilean dictatorship was basically a bureaucratic authoritarian regime, except that the original leader of the 1973 coup, General Augusto Pinochet, had a leading role unparalleled in Brazil or Argentina. Sadly, exceptional Chile had for once become the epitome of a Latin American trend.

Peru, on the other hand, constitutes an interesting exception to the trend, because its military government was not driven by anticommunist reaction. Peruvian officers announced revolutionary intentions that were explicitly not communist but also not capitalist. Their program showed a sincere desire to serve Peru's poor majority, and it amounted mostly to old-fashioned nationalism: a truly ambitious agrarian reform in a country of vast rural poverty, nationalization of oil and other industries, and indigenista themes, such as raising Quechua to the formal status of co–national language with Spanish. Other aspects, such as promotion of employee-owned companies, were more novel. Overall, Peru's military government, which lasted from 1968 to 1980, was hard to categorize in Cold War terms. Although a dictatorship, it was not guilty of heinous human rights violations.

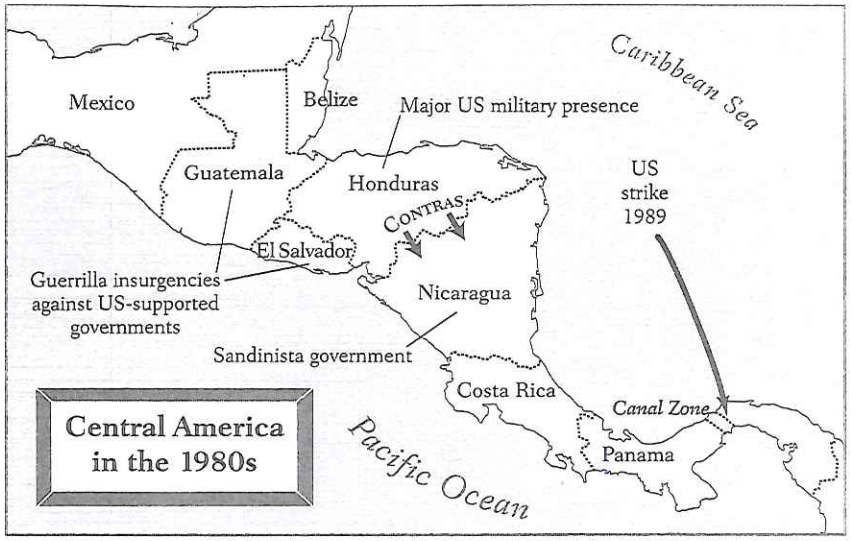
The revolutionary government of Cuba, which expressed strong support for the Peruvian regime, could be described the same way in the 1970s and 1980s. It remained authoritarian, and the army, long headed by Fidel Castro's brother Raúl, constituted one of its chief pillars. But the revolutionary state worked steadily to improve the lives of Cuba's poor majority, and it never committed the wholesale mayhem so characteristic of anticommunist military governments.

Mexico, on the other hand, bucked the military trend completely. Marxism had influenced a generation of Mexican

students no less than elsewhere. But revolutionary socialism was nothing new in Mexico, so its anticommunist reaction was less fearful, less violent. The rhetoric of the PRI—officially a "revolutionary party," after all—had employed socialist motifs off and on for decades. In the 1930s, Mexico had seen real land reform and the expropriation of major foreign-owned industries. Precisely for this reason, the PRI retained considerable revolutionary legitimacy and, through its massive patronage, kept a firm grip on industrial workers, urban middle classes, and country people alike. Buoyed by an oil boom, too, the PRI could absorb any challenge in the 1960s and 1970s. Its one famous sign of momentary panic, as Mexico prepared to host the Olympic Games in 1968, was a wanton massacre of protesting university students in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City. As for Mexican generals, they had not been key political players for decades. And in the United States, dire warnings about "Red" Mexico were already half a century old and not very scary. US governments had long since learned to live with a "revolutionary" Mexico.

THE LAST COLD WAR BATTLES: CENTRAL AMERICA

By the mid-1970s, the revolutionary tide had turned in Latin America. Reactionary anticommunist dictatorships, in turn, began to recede. Bureaucratic authoritarian governments collapsed in the late 1970s and 1980s because of their own mistakes and excesses—the creation of colossal debts, hyperinflation—but also because their anticommunist crusades had already succeeded. What excuse, now, for dictatorship? In Argentina, the military government made a desperate bid for nationalist glory by identifying a new, external enemy—Great Britain. Initially, the military got considerable public support for its 1982 war with Great Britain over the Falkland, or Malvinas, Islands. But the gambit backfired when ill-equipped, poorly trained Argentine soldiers quickly surrendered. Nothing disgraces military rulers like military defeat. In 1983, Argentina had real elections and sent the armed forces back to the barracks.



Uruguay got a civilian president in 1984, Brazil in 1985. Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia had already returned to constitutional rule, too, by that time. Meanwhile, revolutionaries and reactionaries in Central America fought what turned out to be the last major battles of the hemisphere's thirty-year Cold War.

Central America, with its volcanoes, tropical forests, and steep cascading rivers, had barely felt ISI. All Central American countries depended heavily on a few agricultural exports, especially coffee and bananas. Their populations numbered only a few million, and their capital cities had only a few hundred thousand inhabitants each. In Central America, urban workers and middle classes had not curbed the power of landowners, who still controlled the national wealth. Therefore, rural oligarchies still dominated Central America in the 1970s, half a cen-

tury after nationalist movements overthrew them elsewhere. The fate of the Arbenz government in Guatemala, the first major hemispheric battlefield of the Cold War, points out another barrier to Central American nationalism—the habit of US intervention in "our backyard." Throughout the Cold War years, Central America was plagued by greedy tyrants who enjoyed US support because of their furious anticommunism.

Furious anticommunism certainly characterized the rulers of Guatemala. Guatemalans had groaned under ruthless military or military-controlled governments ever since 1954. The landowners of Guatemala and El Salvador lived in dread of massive peasant uprisings. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Guatemalan armed forces carried on a dirty war against rural guerrilla armies and urban opponents such as student activists and labor leaders. To deprive the guerrillas of support, indigenous peasants were herded into new "model" villages that served as rural concentration camps. "Low-intensity conflict" became the US strategists' new term for all this. The term has its logic, from the perspective of a desk at the Pentagon, but for the families of the "disappeared" college students whose bodies turned up in garbage dumps, for indigenous people like Rigoberta Menchú, whose mother and brother were tortured and murdered by the Guatemalan army, these conflicts were not lacking in "intensity."

Rigoberta Menchú was a Quiché Mayan woman whose community wished only to raise its crops and follow its traditional customs. Rigoberta's father became a peasant organizer and her brothers joined the guerrillas. Rigoberta herself was influenced by liberation theology and became a spokesperson for her people. In 1992 she won the Nobel Peace Prize for calling world attention to the atrocities of Guatemala's dirty war. The story of her life, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), became essential reading for anyone interested in the "low-intensity

conflicts" of the Cold War. It was later shown that she had merged her own story with other people's, but no one could deny the existence of the horrors she described. The Guatemalan death toll spiraled toward two hundred thousand, and the military perpetrated 95 percent of the atrocities, just as her story suggested.

Costa Rica, at the other extreme of Central America in all senses—geographical, social, and political—largely escaped the crossfire of the Cold War. Because Costa Rica had few indigenous inhabitants before the conquest—and, more to the point, because those few were then liquidated by the conquerors—this whitest of Central American countries was less burdened by exploitative colonial hierarchies. Consequently, it was less politically explosive, too. Besides, one of Costa Rica's more innovative presidents had taken the precaution of abolishing the army in the 1940s.

In between Central America's geographic and demographic extremes was Nicaragua, land of the famous anti-imperialist Augusto César Sandino, whose guerrilla war against the US Marines had won the rapt attention of nationalists all over Latin America in the 1920s. Since the 1930s, Nicaragua had been ruled by a single family, the Somozas. The Somozas personified the perverse side effects of US anticommunism in Cold War Latin America. The Somoza dynasty had its origins in the US intervention against Sandino, when the first Somoza, Anastasio, whose main qualification was that he spoke good English, headed the Nicaraguan National Guard. Somoza invited Sandino to parlay, had him assassinated, and then used the National Guard to take over Nicaragua. Various Somozas ran the country almost as a private estate during the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s. They were sturdy anticommunist allies who also preserved enough democratic window dressing to satisfy US diplomats. Symbolically, the Somoza mansion stood near the

US Embassy on a hill overlooking Managua, the Nicaraguan capital. Rumor had it that an underground tunnel connected the two buildings. Anastasio Somoza's son, also Anastasio, who ruled the country in the 1970s, was a West Point graduate and head of Nicaragua's US-trained, US-equipped National Guard. Meanwhile, the Somoza family wealth swelled to include about a fifth of Nicaragua's best land, the country's airline, and other such trifles.

By 1961, Nicaragua had a revolutionary movement formed in Havana, but also inspired by Nicaragua's own strong anti-imperialist traditions. Like Cuba and Mexico, Nicaragua had long suffered US intervention, and nationalist resentments ran deep there. Remembering Sandino's earlier anti-imperialist struggle, the revolutionaries of the 1960s called themselves the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). For almost two decades, the Sandinistas alone resisted the Somozas. Then, in 1978, the dictator Anastasio Somoza overplayed his hand, assassinating Joaquín Chamorro, publisher of a conservative opposition newspaper. Chamorro's death finally united Nicaraguans of the left and the right against the Somozas. A widespread rebellion began, and the veteran Sandinistas assumed leadership. Eventually, the uprising swept away the National Guard despite its arms and training. Somoza fled Nicaragua for Miami. His fate illustrates the international dimensions of the conflict. In search of a comfortable exile, the unpopular Somoza accepted the hospitality of Paraguay's anticommunist strongman, Alfredo Stroessner, one of the world's most durable and repressive dictators. But Somoza had hardly unpacked his bags in Asunción when Argentine guerrillas, who considered him their enemy too, found him and put an antitank rocket through the windshield of his bulletproof Mercedes Benz.

Back in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas took charge, shouldering aside Violeta Chamorro, widow of the murdered publisher, who represented the late-blooming anti-Somoza forces of the

right. The Sandinistas had nonnegotiable revolutionary plans. Their Cuban inspiration was reflected in their campaigns for full literacy and public health. Hundreds of Cuban teachers, medical personnel, and sanitary engineers arrived to help. France, Spain, and West Germany sent substantial aid, too. US President Jimmy Carter also gave cautious support, but he was soon replaced by Ronald Reagan. From Reagan's perspective, Nicaragua was just another square on the Cold War chessboard. As long as the Sandinistas identified themselves as revolutionary friends of Cuba, nothing else mattered. The Cold War language of Reagan found a mirror image in Sandinista rhetoric about that "scourge of the human race," the United States. Confrontation was in the cards.

Following their defeat in 1979, Somoza's trusty National Guard had regrouped in Honduras under CIA supervision. The Argentine military government, triumphant in their dirty war, sent trainers for this new US proxy force called the Contras, for *counter*revolutionaries. Through the 1980s, the Contras raided Nicaragua from bases on the Honduran side of the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Reagan called them "Freedom Fighters" and supported them unwaveringly. Honduras filled with US military personnel, supply dumps, and air bases. The Contras gained recruits among Nicaraguans disaffected by the Sandinista revolution. Contra raiders could wreak havoc and cripple the economy, but they could not hold Nicaraguan territory.

Havoc was enough, however. The Sandinistas had to concentrate their time and money on defense. US forces mined Nicaragua's harbors to cut off its trade with other countries. Gradually, the Nicaraguan economy disintegrated. By 1988, Nicaragua had quintuple-digit inflation. In 1990, the Sandinistas lost an election on which they had staked everything. In a stunning defeat, the young Sandinista guerrilla leader Daniel Ortega took second place to Violeta Chamorro, who became the first woman

ever elected president in Latin America. In the 1990s, Nicaragua remained divided, a circumstance dramatized by Chamorro's own family, which included several prominent Sandinistas as well as opposition leaders. At one point, two of Chamorro's sons edited the country's two main newspapers, both the Sandinista *Barricada* and the anti-Sandinista *Prensa*.

The uprising against Somoza, and then the Contra war, had killed tens of thousands of Nicaraguans. El Salvador suffered even more. Like Nicaragua under the Somozas, tiny El Salvador had a totally undemocratic anticommunist government through the 1960s and 1970s. If Nicaragua had a classic dictatorship, El Salvador had an equally classic landowning oligarchy, called the "fourteen families" or, sometimes, "the forty families." The precise number matters less than the general fact of oligarchic rule by the few.

The misery of the rural poor had made El Salvador a social pressure cooker by the 1970s. Long before coffee, Spanish conquest and colonization had pushed El Salvador's indigenous people off level agricultural land onto then-unwanted volcanic slopes, where they reestablished their communities. But those fertile slopes, once terraced, were perfect for coffee. So when coffee cultivation began in the 1870s, prospective coffee planters wanted the slopes also. Liberal reforms then privatized the indigenous people's newly valuable community lands, and, little by little, in fair deals and unfair ones, coffee planters bought them. Indigenous Salvadorans became agricultural peons on estates that had once been their own lands. Workers were many—tiny El Salvador is among the most densely populated landscapes in the Americas—and wages low. Very gradually, the rural poor began to starve. During the 1920s, the Salvadoran Communist Party became one of the strongest in Latin America, but its attempt to lead a major uprising was savagely crushed in "the Slaughter of 1932." Military and military-controlled governments then followed one another in El Salvador for almost half a century, all staunchly anticommunist and allied with the United States. In the 1960s, El Salvador became a showcase of the Alliance for Progress, but little improved in the countryside.

Then, in the 1970s, the Salvadoran church began to take liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor." In effect, the country's highest Catholic authority decided that anticommunism itself was an unholy cause. Archbishop Oscar Romero was a quiet man, named to head the Salvadoran church because he seemed conservative to the Vatican. But anticommunist death squads changed his heart by targeting priests and nuns who worked with the poor. "Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest" was the anticommunist slogan. Moved by the butchery of his clergy and flock, the archbishop spoke against the army. The anticommunists viewed this as a dangerous heresy. One day in 1980, a political assassin gunned down Archbishop Romero in front of the altar as he celebrated Mass.

As with Nicaragua's FSLN, Salvadoran revolutionaries drew on history in naming the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Farabundo Martí was a martyred hero of the Salvadoran left, a communist organizer of the indigenous uprising of 1932. In addition, Martí had served with Sandino in Nicaragua against US forces there. In the 1980s, the FSLN tried to return the favor by helping the FMLN against the US-backed Salvadoran army. But the Sandinistas, fighting to keep the Nicaraguan revolution alive, could offer only a few crates of munitions to the FMLN. The Reagan administration seized on this connection to announce that communism was spreading by contagion from Cuba to Nicaragua to El Salvador. Starving Salvadorans, in this view, would never think of rebelling otherwise. Critics of Reagan's policy, meanwhile, spoke as though the FSLN would, for some reason, never contemplate aiding the FMLN. Neither version captured the truth exactly. The military murders of four nuns from the United States

SALVADORAN GUERRILLA. An FMLN fighter, one of many women in the guerrilla ranks, stands guard in 1983. On the wall behind her is one of the revolutionary slogans that covered walls all over Latin America from the 1960s through the 1980s. *Photograph by Ivan Montecino; image by Bettmann/CORBIS.*

brought Central American issues home to observers of US foreign policy. Were our tax dollars paying for these bullets that cut down priests and nuns in the name of democracy? Massive public opposition to US policy in Latin America, led especially by religious groups, arose now for the only time in the Cold War.

Through the 1980s, FMLN guerrillas held large portions of the Salvadoran countryside. They had strong backing, especially among the country people of remote, mountainous areas along the Honduran border. The FMLN blew up bridges and power lines and levied "war taxes" on vehicles traveling through their territory. But they could not defeat the army. The Salvadoran military, for its part, had US training and equipment. Its troops rode helicopters into guerrilla territory on search-and-

destroy missions. They clambered up the sides of volcanoes seeking FMLN units near to the capital city. Sometimes, when they thought no one was looking, the army conducted mass executions of peasants whom they suspected of aiding the guerrillas. One day in 1981, for example, an elite US-trained battalion entered the tiny village of El Mozote and systematically slaughtered almost everybody there, hundreds of unarmed, unresisting men, women, and children. Ironically, their military intelligence was not very good: El Mozote, it turned out, was not a guerrilla base at all. In fact, many of the families at El Mozote had recently converted to US-oriented evangelical Protestantism, and they probably favored the government over the guerrillas. El Mozote illustrates the grisly, indiscriminate violence of military anticommunism in Central America. Understandably, Salvadorans fled their country by the tens and then hundreds of thousands, many to the United States.

Because the FMLN refused to participate in elections, wary of fraudulent "management," the anticommunists invariably won, assuring US aid for the elected government. As the war dragged on and the death toll mounted—forty, fifty, sixty thousand—anticommunist electoral strength grew. The country was sick of war, and by 1990, the war was a stalemate. The stubborn optimism that had sustained the revolutionary vision now drained away day by day. The Nicaraguan election of 1990 ended the Sandinista revolution. In Europe, the dramatically rapid crumbling of the Soviet bloc had begun. An FMLN victory seemed further away than ever. And, even if achieved, an FMLN victory would not bring peace; the Nicaraguan experience showed that. So, in 1992, the FMLN signed a peace treaty and laid down its arms. Meanwhile, the Guatemalan insurgents, too, were running out of steam. A peace born of exhaustion settled over Central America.

The Cold War was over. But in Latin America, nobody had won; there were only losers. Across the hemisphere, the

revolutionary fervor of the 1950s and 1960s had burned itself out in the 1970s and 1980s. In a few places, such as Uruguay, guerrilla movements had led to the collapse of democratic governments. In many other places, such as Brazil and Chile, generals inspired by national security doctrine had precipitated the terror. Either way, bright hopes of finally undoing Latin America's original sin of social injustice had drowned in blood and disillusionment. Latin America had been thoroughly militarized, occupied by its own armed forces. During the 1990s, guerrilla movements remained active in spots—Colombia, Peru, southern Mexico—but the sense of a continental revolutionary tide had evaporated totally. As in the rest of the world, the end of the Cold War clearly marked the end of an epoch. A new period of history was about to begin.

COUNTERCURRENTS:
La Violencia, Pablo Escobar, and Colombia's Long Torment

Colombia's population surpassed Argentina's in the 1990s, making it the third most populous Latin American country after Brazil and Mexico. Despite its size and importance, Colombia has not figured frequently in our story because of its often exceptional politics. For example, conservatives, rather than liberals, ruled Colombia in the neocolonial period. During the stormy years of the Cold War, the Colombian military never took over the country directly. While debt and inflation ravaged Latin America in the 1980s, a so-called Lost Decade for hopes of economic growth, Colombia's economy stayed robust. And Colombia's contrary tendencies continued into the new millennium. With the Cold War over and revolutionaries in retreat everywhere else in the hemisphere, the guerrilla armies of Colombia expanded their operations.

An unusual level of violence has plagued Colombia since the 1940s, when conflicts erupted across the Colombian countryside after the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the famous populist leader. This period, accurately called *La Violencia*, lasted well into the 1950s. Although channeled by Colombia's traditional parties, the liberals and the conservatives, *La Violencia* was less about politics than about socioeconomic conflict in the countryside. Terrified people flocked into the cities, abandoning their rural property or selling out cheaply. Others stayed and bought up the land at bargain prices. The use of violence increased in petty street crime, which rose to astounding intensity in the major cities. Middle-class women began to remove their earrings and men their wristwatches before setting foot downtown. In the late 1970s,

the rate of violent death in Colombia began to set world records for a country not at war.

It was in this context of lawlessness that Pablo Escobar pioneered a new business, smuggling marijuana and then cocaine to the United States. Escobar created a mafia empire and became a powerful figure of organized crime, much like Al Capone in an earlier period of US history. Recall that the mafia business of Capone likewise centered on an illegal drug, prohibition-era alcohol. Escobar's version of Capone's Chicago was the Colombian city of Medellín, and his mafia became known as the Medellín cartel. The terrible scourge of easy money now lent new energy to the violence rampant in Colombian life. US consumers of illegal drugs were able to pay huge sums for the Colombian product. Colombian-grown marijuana, which dominated the trade in the 1970s, was of higher quality than the Mexican marijuana formerly consumed in the United States. Cocaine, which came from coca leaves grown in Peru or Bolivia, then refined in and exported from Colombia, dominated the trade in the 1980s. It was a new drug to most US consumers, made available in large quantities for the first time by Escobar's organization. The great wealth of the drug traffickers translated, as great wealth will do, into power and influence.

Meanwhile, Colombia suffered its own version of the Cold War. Rural guerrilla armies with their roots in *La Violencia* of the 1950s, especially the FARC, were now seen, and saw themselves, as Marxist revolutionaries. A daring group of urban guerrillas called the Nineteenth of April Movement—M-19, for short—raised the sword of Simón Bolívar, taken from a museum display case, to symbolize the new revolution. Like the Tupamaros in Uruguay, Colombia's M-19 carried out spectacular strikes with high public-relations value. In 1980, they took over the embassy of the Dominican Republic in Bogotá during a party, when it was full of diplomats,

including the US ambassador, and held them hostage for two months before escaping to Cuba. In 1985, M-19 seized the Colombian Supreme Court building. The government refused to negotiate and, after ten hours of ultimatums, it sent a tank in through the front door, followed by troops with guns blazing. Ninety-five civilians—among them, all the country's Supreme Court justices—died in the crossfire.

Then things got even worse. The FARC and a second army of rural guerrillas, the ELN, forced landowners to pay "war taxes," and the landowners began to create their own paramilitary forces to help the army fight the guerrillas. Country people found themselves caught in the middle. If they helped the guerrillas, they risked death at the hands of the paramilitaries or the army. But the guerrillas might kill those who refused to help them. Meanwhile, the guerrillas, who had turned kidnapping into one of their principal fund-raising activities, had the bad idea of abducting members of rich mafia families. The drug traffickers struck back with massive violence. Medellín became a war zone where teenage boys were enlisted by the hundreds as hit men. Under pressure from Colombian police and courts, the drug traffickers escaped prosecution by slaughtering any judge willing to sign a warrant against them.

When threatened with extradition to the United States, Escobar and his associates reacted with "narco-terrorism." Truck bombs carrying tons of dynamite exploded on the streets of Colombian cities, and the Medellín cartel collectively resisted arrest and extradition. Journalists and politicians who spoke for extradition were murdered or kidnapped. Escobar and others offered to surrender in return for a guarantee of non-extradition. In 1991, that deal finally went through. Escobar surrendered and moved into a jail especially constructed near Medellín, ironically in a former drug-treatment facility. Although he was in custody, the lax conditions of his

imprisonment—in which he gradually surrounded himself with luxury furnishings in mafia-style poor taste—allowed Escobar to continue to supervise his illegal business interests by remote control. Within a year, he had flown the coop. But now, despite the estimated $3 billion that Escobar had amassed, he led a miserable existence, permanently on the run. Finally, in 1993, Colombian police found Escobar by tracing his son's telephone. Escobar was still on the phone when the police arrived at his door. The world's most famous criminal died ingloriously as he fled across a Medellín rooftop.

Meanwhile, the drug trade that he initiated had become a source of income for the guerrillas too. The entry of the guerrilla armies into the drug trade threatened a further escalation of conflict in Colombia at the close of the millennium. For a while at least, the Colombian government became the world's third largest recipient of US aid. Meanwhile, a number of failed attempts to negotiate with the guerrillas led to the election of Alvaro Uribe, a hard-line president determined to win a military victory. Penniless people displaced from the war zones flooded into Colombian cities already swollen by two generations of rapid growth. Colombia's long torment was still far from over.