

Latin America after independence from Spain and Portugal

What problems did the Latin American countries have in common?

When you get rid of your king, make sure you have a better idea. Because creating a government is hard.
And when you do it wrong, people suffer

From the Cold War [1946-1989] on....

How did the Cold War affect Latin America? Why did the United States get involved?

During the Cold War, the United States and the USSR were the two global superpowers, bent on each other's destruction. They basically asked all the other countries in the world to pick a side. Here was the question: Was your government communist? If the answer was yes, you gained the powerful support of the Soviets. And if the answer was no, the United States was your heavily armed buddy. Whether they were communist or not, postcolonial Latin American governments had some ruthless and violent leaders. To fight against the Soviet Union, the United States actively **intervened** in communist Latin American countries like Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Chile. For the United States, *communist* equaled "evil." But it wasn't so simple.

What is the difference between left and right wing? And why is it confusing? To understand what went down in Latin America after independence, we need to know two terms: left wing and right wing. These terms refer to people with opposing political views. People who believe in left wing government are often known as liberals. They believe that more people should take part in important government decisions, to give a greater number of people a voice. Left wingers also believe that the government should help support citizens through programs like health care. Those who support right wing government are generally known as conservatives. Right wing governments are smaller. That means that fewer people make the decisions. In the most extreme right wing governments, one person makes decisions. Conservatives think the government should have less of a role in helping people. They put stock in an individual's efforts more than his or her social responsibility.

Neither left nor right is objectively "better" than the other. There can be great and terrible right wing leaders and great or terrible left wing leaders. Can you think of the pros and cons of both types of government?

A left-leaning government is a bigger government. These governments usually control businesses. At the extreme, this is what communism tries to do. A right-leaning government is a smaller government. These governments let businesses do their thing. Under pure capitalism, businesses would operate with no rules.

The United States supported parties in Latin American countries who wanted to kick the communists out of power. But the United States found itself supporting some ruthless dictators just because they weren't communists.



Che Guevara and Fidel Castro

Why did the United States get involved in Cuba?

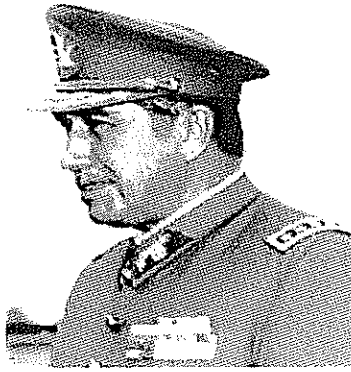
Though Cuba was independent from Spain, the United States was deeply involved in the economy there. Sugar production was the main crop, and the United States completely controlled it. Most of the Cuban people were poor because all the money was either flowing to the United States or the corrupt government. In 1953, Fulgencia Batista overthrew the government in a coup. But only six years later, Fidel Castro overthrew Batista's government. Castro was communist, so suddenly Cuba was an enemy of the United States. The United States refused to trade with Cuba, and United States citizens are still not often allowed to go there. Though medicine and education flourished under Castro's rule, he imposed strict censorship. He is still the leader today, though he is in ill health and his brother Raul is officially in charge. Many Cubans have risked their lives to escape across the water to Florida.

What's a banana republic?

A banana republic is a country that has an almost powerless government and that is instead run or controlled by a company for the purpose of producing and exporting a good (often bananas). Guatemala was just such a country in the early twentieth century. The American-owned United Fruit Company (UFC) controlled the only major port, most of the railroad and telegraph wires, and a large portion of the farmable land in Guatemala. The government officials did anything that the UFC told them to do. While back in the United States and Europe, people started expecting bananas to be the cheapest fruit around.

How did the CIA get involved in Guatemala?

Militant dictators had control of Guatemala until the 1950s. One dictator was Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. He had enacted land reforms that were communist in nature, and the United States was strongly anti-communist. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped to overthrow him in 1954. But this coup was followed by decades of violence under the leadership of a military junta. The Guatemalans only began to have a democratic government in 1996, and there is still a strong military force there. Many blame the United States for starting this violence.



What is the other infamous September 11th?

Socialist leader Salvador Allende took control of **Chile** in 1970. With the support of the United States, Augusto Pinochet overthrew the government in a military coup on the original infamous September 11 in 1973. But under the harsh rule of Pinochet, people suffered massive **human rights violations**. Thousands were killed and tortured. Pinochet gave up power in 1990 to a democratically elected leader. There were hundreds of legal charges against him for human rights violations, but he died before he had to pay the price.



Who were the "disappeared" in Argentina?

Before the *Great Depression*, **Argentina** was making lots of money from meat production. But when the depression hit, the people turned to authoritarian leadership. The military general Juan Perón took power after World War II. His wife Eva Perón was quite popular, and while she was alive, Perón enjoyed much support. She was especially popular with poor workers known as the *descamisados*, or "shirtless ones." But a popular leader with a pretty face can distract from the abuses behind the scenes. During Perón's dictatorship, which lasted until his death, he supported the "Dirty War," in which the government sponsored the killing of up to 30,000 people who opposed government views. The people who were killed were known as the "disappeared," since they were taken out of their homes or off the street by secret police and never heard from again. It is assumed that the government killed them. Finally, in 1983 a civilian government was reinstated.



Why was it controversial when the United States intervened in Nicaragua?

The most controversial United States intervention happened in **Nicaragua**. The Nicaraguan **Somoza** family held control of Nicaragua until 1979. That year, the **Sandinistas** revolted against the government. They were very far left and connected to Cuba and the USSR; these countries actually supplied their weapons. So of course, the United States supported an anti-communist group called the **Contras**, who fought against the Sandinistas for power.

In 1983, Congress said that President Reagan couldn't support the **Contras** anymore, but the United States continued to supply them with weapons secretly by sending the weapons to Iran, who then shipped them over to the **Contras**. (This was during the Iran-Iraq war, and it became known as the **Iran-Contra Affair**.) The **Contras** and **Sandinistas** reached a peace treaty in 1987, though, and there has been a moderate government in place since then.



What violence occurred in Brazil and El Salvador?

Like Argentina, **Brazil** also turned to dictatorship after the *Great Depression*. Their dictator was *Getúlio Vargas*. He didn't start out as a tyrant, but eventually he turned Brazil into a fascist state. Fascism is the most extreme form of conservative government. Vargas ruled until 1945 as the poor slept in *favelas*, or slums. Upon his overthrow, Brazil slowly returned to a democratic rule.

Civil war broke out in **El Salvador** in 1979 between left wing and right wing guerilla fighters. The right wing fighters had United States support. The war ended years later, after 75,000 people had been killed. Finally, in 1992, the two sides signed a peace treaty.