The 1959 Cuban revolution did not change the U.S. preference for arming dictators, but it permanently altered the political landscape of Latin America. The revolutionary movement led by Fidel Castro and his ragtag band of guerrillas toppled the repressive Batista regime and then consolidated its own power base by radically reconfiguring Cuban society. The revolutionaries expropriated the resources of wealthy Cuban capitalists and their U.S. allies. They launched a radical agrarian reform program, and they initiated far-reaching changes in health care and education. Then, the government embraced Marxism-Leninism and allied with the Soviet Union. The United States perceived the Cuban revolution as not only a threat to its interests in Cuba but also to its hegemony throughout the hemisphere, where the revolution represented an appealing alternative to the status quo for many Latin Americans. The revolutionaries themselves encouraged these perceptions by announcing their intention to spread revolution across Latin America, and, throughout the region in the 1960s and early 1970s, small groups in almost every country embraced the Cuban example and tried to emulate its tactics and strategy (Pérez 1995; Castañeda 1993, 68–69).

The U.S. military believed that the Cuban revolution provided clear proof of an international communist conspiracy, and national security doctrine formed the bedrock of military thinking in its aftermath. The subsequent inability of the United States to impose order on Vietnam, despite the commitment of over 500,000 troops, almost certainly played a part in convincing military strategists of the ungovernability of the Third World, and it probably magnified fears of conspiring communists in Latin American peasant villages. Communist subversion became defined as anything that challenged the status quo, and broad sectors of the population—students, activists, trade unionists, peasant organizers, and religious catechists—came under suspicion.

The triumph of the Cuban revolution insured the institutional survival of the Ground School. After undergoing a reorganization in 1949 and reemerging as the U.S. Caribbean School, the institution was restructured again in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution and became known as the...
School of the Americas in 1963. Training the militaries of the Americas to fight communism became its raison d’être, and counterinsurgency instruction evolved as a major new focus of its activities. The School had moved into a former hospital building on the grounds of Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal Zone, and 13,500 students attended its classes in the decade following the Cuban revolution, a 42 percent increase over the first thirteen years of the School’s existence. Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Panama, and Peru were the countries most heavily represented. Each sent between one thousand and two thousand trainees to the school between 1960 and 1969.

Cecil Himes was the commandant of the School when the Cuban revolutionaries stormed into Havana, and he oversaw the organization of the first counterinsurgency training course. “President Kennedy issued instructions that we would have a counter-guerrilla course,” he told me in 1999, when I interviewed the eighty-three-year-old retired colonel at his home in a leafy suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. “The army had the Special Forces and [setting up the counter-insurgency program] was their mission. The Special Forces came down and made recommendations and assisted us in setting up the course. The [School] instructors also worked with the Special Forces people.”

The military doctrine of counterinsurgency warfare started to dominate U.S. policy in Latin America after the Cuban revolution. Its special contribution, according to Michael McClinton, “was the legitimation of state terrorism as a means to confront dissent, subversion, and insurgency. The characteristic organizational forms of the counterinsurgency state were vast formations of paramilitary irregulars, elite Special Forces–style units, and powerful centralized intelligence agencies under military control” (1991, 121). Counterinsurgency warfare was the covert side of the Alliance for Progress, the massive U.S. assistance program to Latin America initiated by President Kennedy that combined highly publicized civic action programs with clandestine terror and massive violence. Civic action and security in fact went hand in hand. Many policymakers, academics, and military strategists in both the United States and Latin America believed that the military was the only institution capable of maintaining domestic tranquility while simultaneously promoting economic growth. Nevertheless, counterinsurgency doctrine’s emphasis on development and security provided the armed forces with a rationale for intruding more deeply into the lives of ordinary people, and its most
striking feature was that it prescribed terror as a tactic for fighting guerrilla insurgencies, which, at least in the eyes of the U.S. military, used the same tactic against the governments of the region (McClintock 1991).

Counterinsurgency warfare fascinated President Kennedy, whose administration underwrote the resurgence and expansion of the Special Forces. Operating out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the Special Forces provided counterinsurgency training to foreign officers and those from the United States' four service branches, but most of its training of foreign forces was conducted outside the United States. The Mobile Training Team, or MTT, was—and continues to be—its principal medium for training soldiers abroad. An MTT consisted of two officers and ten enlisted men sent on short-term missions to work with conventional armies, intelligence groups, and paramilitary irregulars. More than six hundred Special Forces MTTs operated in Latin America between 1962 and 1967 (McClintock 1992, 187).