cishly 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 anticomunist 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 anticomunist 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 constitu-

[Map of Central America in the 1980s]
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 they 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, assas-
sinating 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 re-
bellion 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 dic-
tators. 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 wind-
shield of his bulletproof Mercedes Benz.

Back in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas took charge, shoulder-
ing 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 per-
spective, 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 Sandi-
nista 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 counterrevolutionaries. 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 ter-
ritory.

Havoc was enough, however. The Sandinistas had to con-
centrate 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 Sandi-
nistas 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 dra-
matized 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.

**Reaction**

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 FMLN 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 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, resisting 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 gristy, 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.