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## *The Cold War, Latin America and Washington, DC*

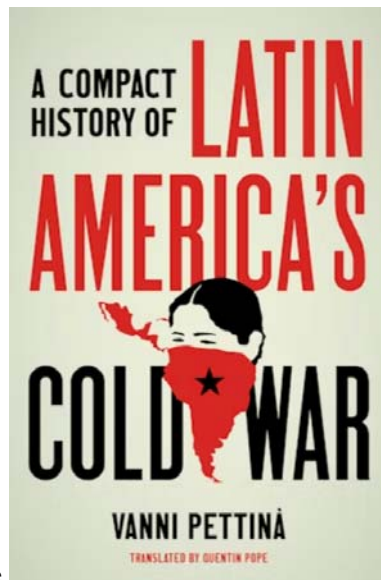


Image by Scott Umstattd.

Living in the United States means living in a nation whose rulers have always been intent on expanding their wealth and their reach. This fact of history has created a legacy of death, destruction, and theft. It has also enabled a majority of the citizens in the nation to benefit from these crimes; a fact which has encouraged them to ignore the sources of their relative well-being. Of course, the dynamic involved in the creation of this collaborative populace is one that involves an ever more sophisticated system of propaganda. It is a system which plays on the arrogance and racism of the population and can be seen most graphically in the treatment of the indigenous peoples of northern America and the enslavement (and the legacy thereof) of Africans and their descendants. Similarly, this attitude is transmitted overseas via military aggression, trade deals and treaties. Perhaps

the most obvious example of the latter is the 1823 doctrine named after President James Monroe. Known as the Monroe Doctrine and originally made policy in Monroe's annual letter to Congress, it claims the Western hemisphere as Washington's own.

Over the years, the doctrine was only occasionally challenged by foreign powers. One such period where this occurred with perhaps greater frequency than any other time since the war known as the Spanish-American war was the time of the Cold War. This was a period when the United States dominated many places around the globe—from Europe to Asia to Latin America. It was also a period that featured the rise of national liberation struggles in the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The movements waging those struggles often contained a strong Marxist element. Consequently, they were usually supported by the Soviet Union, the one superpower opposed to US imperialism. The fact of Moscow's communist-inspired government and its support for these movements convinced those in power in Washington, DC that Moscow wanted to take over the world. A closer truth was that Washington's new imperial prowess was being threatened by the anti-colonial struggle in Europe's former colonies and neither the Pentagon or the State Department was going to let that struggle proceed without a



response.

So, the struggles for freedom from colonialism across the world after World War Two were reframed as a battle against the Soviet Union and its totalitarian regime. Washington's forces were now supporting its European colonialist allies against the people fighting for independence in numerous countries around the world. Furthermore, the regimes the US were supporting were authoritarian and brutal. As most people know, Washington's military would outdo the rest of its allies in terms of brutality in Korea and

Vietnam. However, it is the regimes Washington supported in Latin America that were probably the most vicious against their own people. Often fascist in philosophy, those regimes, from Nicaragua to Argentina; from Brazil to Guatemala and El Salvador, utilized paramilitary death squads, torture and genocide to maintain the status quo demanded by Washington and its cohorts of capital.

A recent book by Vanni Pettinà, titled *[A Compact History of Latin America's Cold War](#)*, takes a deep and astute look at the dynamic discussed above. A professor of Latin American international history at El Colegio de México, Pettinà's text is a geopolitical reading attempting to present the effects of the cold war on Latin America from a unique Latin American perspective. In other words, his history provides the individual governments of the nations discussed a fair amount of agency in terms of what they did. This approach is a unusual one for many readers in the United States, where the emphasis is often on the role played by US forces. Global and local economics are present in this analysis, but it is the prism of the Cold war as a political struggle that is the primary informant of the text.

The insistence on placing the Latin American regimes at the forefront of this history has its drawbacks. One example of such comes to my mind immediately is the portrayal of the Carter administration as a defender of human rights whose foreign policy was moving beyond the Cold War dynamic. Indeed, Pettinà writes that Zbigniew Brzezinski "argued that the international system had moved beyond the bipolar dynamic..." when in fact, the Carter administration (with Brzezinski at the lead) had begun arming the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan to "giv(e) to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire." (Le Nouvel Observateur (France), Jan 15-21, 1998) When Pettinà discusses the military repression of the Left and its allies across Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s he seems to portray it as a collaboration between Washington and the various military regimes led by the regimes, as if the training, money and much of the equipment was not a large part of the aid being funneled from DC to Latin America. He does point out that this repression was often hitched to economic policies that would be one known as neoliberalism in the very near future. As any student of Chilean history knows, the institution of this economic approach was not homegrown. Indeed, it was the pride and joy of Milton Friedman and the Chicago school of economics, who began its implementation soon after the 1973 CIA sponsored

coup in Santiago. A similar understanding informs his discussion of the role played by US allies like Israel in the region—a role that gave Washington some plausible deniability.

I would not describe *A Compact History of Latin America's Cold War* as an intentionally anti-imperialist book (nor do I believe this is the author's intent). However, its mostly objective approach puts the cold war above any other rationale for US support of mostly reactionary regimes in Latin America. That in itself makes it fundamentally anti-imperialist. This text is one more in a library of post-World War Two histories that make me wonder how anyone with critical thinking facilities could see the US in that period as anything but an imperialist hegemon. Even histories supporting the US role prove this reality.

In other words, the facts speak for themselves.

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