

Closing the Veins of Latin America

Introduction

At 5:30 in the morning of June 28, 2009, the sitting president of the Republic of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, was arrested in his Tegucigalpa home by a group of armed soldiers belonging to the Honduran armed forces. Still in his pajamas, he was taken to Soto Cano Air Base – jointly operated by the Honduran and U.S. Air Forces – where he was put on a presidential jet and flown to Costa Rica. Before even Zelaya's family knew what had happened, the president of Honduras's congress, Roberto Micheletti, had been named provisional president. Within hours the Honduran people took to the street with chants of “*;Queremos a Manuel!*” – we want Manuel (*López*). The following months saw the removal of virtually all of Zelaya's allies, including the mayor of San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city. In response, every Latin American state refused to recognize the new government and labeled the military's actions a coup d'état. Intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS) quickly followed suit. Only the United States' veto prevented the OAS from expelling Honduras. The coup was the culmination of an internal power struggle between President Zelaya and the military and its right-wing civilian supporters, sparked by the president's call for a referendum to rewrite the nation's constitution. The Honduran military technically acted alone, but despite publicly backing Zelaya's return, Washington did nothing to change the situation. According to a private secretary, Enrique Reina, “The Honduran military doesn't do anything without the U.S. approving it,” (*Johnston*). Indeed, the United States was more involved than its public stance would indicate.

Background

Relations between the United States and Central America, despite endless theorizing and justification through ideas like liberty, civilization, and anti-Communism, are indistinguishable from the politics of the Greek city states which inspired the government of the United States. As the Athenians themselves, creators of democracy, explained as they subjugated the city of Melos, “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,” (*Thucydides*). Though the names have changed, the concept still rings true. As early as the 19th century, plans for a canal across the Central American isthmus and private business interests focused U.S. foreign policy on the region. Military force was the tool of the era; gunships bombarded hostile coastal towns (*Schoultz*) and marines protected strategic positions along trade routes. Honduras was the subject of northern imperialism as early as 1860, when parts of the country were briefly occupied by the *filibuster* army of Tennessee-born William Walker. The rationale of the era for the use of force was a quest to “uplift and civilize” (*Schoultz*) the supposedly savage natives, but ultimately the continuous interventions served only U.S. interests. However, blatant aggression soon became detrimental to the United States’ image of an enlightened democracy. Somewhat counterintuitively, as the United States became a global superpower in the 20th century, their imperial operations became more subtle.

The Honduran coup is merely one example of a decades-old method of achieving and maintaining regional hegemony through covert action. In 1957, Guatemala became the testing ground for this new approach. Amid Cold War paranoia, the specter of a potential future Soviet invasion was used to justify the overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz (*Imberman*) by an irregular group of Guatemalan exiles, supported by the CIA. A crucial development from the previous century in the approach to regime change was that no U.S. ground forces were used.

The soldiers that crossed the border from Honduras were Guatemalan, as was Colonel Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas, their commander on the ground (*Immerman*). However, the planes that bombed Guatemala City and their pilots, along with the guns, supplies, training, and (most importantly) leadership were all American. So began the policy of controlling the nations of Latin America with their own people. A small elite would be brought to power and supplied by the United States with the money, weapons, and ideology to maintain their stranglehold on the economy of whichever republic strayed too close to Communism. The strategy was used to immense success across the hemisphere. Though many tried, only a handful of countries escaped from the influence of the United States' weapons, money, and propaganda. Honduras was not one of them. The Central American republic had been ruled by a series of pro-U.S. presidents and military officers since a United States intervention in the 1910's (Woodward), a line broken by President Zelaya, elected in 2006.

The Situation in Honduras

Despite coming to power on a conservative platform, Zelaya aligned himself diplomatically with the few socialist nations in the region, joining the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America* (ALBA) along with Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and Bolivia. He also passed several economic reforms including a massive minimum wage increase (*Thompson*). This drew consternation from Honduran business leaders, right-wing politicians and military officers (*Sáenz*), and crucially, the United States. According to Colonel Andrew Papp, military attaché to the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa at the time, Washington "didn't really like the guy," (*Johnston*). These groups unified behind the Honduran armed forces to remove President Zelaya from power permanently. While the 2009 Honduran constitutional crisis was not a U.S.-backed coup d'état in the traditional sense, neither was it an entirely homegrown

conflict. Right-wing elements of the Honduran government and armed forces took their own initiative, but used training, intelligence, and material support provided by the United States. Meanwhile, Washington worked behind the scenes to prevent the return of President Zelaya, legitimize the interim government, and block multilateral action against the perpetrators.

Justification

Though Zelaya's leftward swing alienated the Honduran elite and threatened the ties between Honduras and the United States, open political conflict was sparked by a dispute over the country's constitution. In the prior weeks, Zelaya had called for a referendum on rewriting the document, which Honduran courts and congress ruled unconstitutional, accusing the president of trying to remove his term limits. Undeterred, Zelaya led a group of supporters to an Air Force base where they seized the ballots for the referendum (*Malkin*). When the commander of the armed forces, General Romeo Vásquez, refused a request to have the army organize the vote, the president fired him, though he was immediately reinstated by the Supreme Court. Critics of Zelaya claimed that his attempts to edit the constitution was a power grab akin to authoritarian socialists such as Hugo Chavez, a view supported by his alignment with the dictatorships of Cuba and Venezuela. These accusations, unsurprisingly, found sympathetic ears in Washington, as Honduras had long been used as a staging ground for U.S.-backed anti-Communist operations. Florida Representative Connie Mack IV even went so far as to call the referendum requested by Zelaya "The real coup and the only coup," (*U.S. Congress, House*), while praising Micheletti as a "hero."

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the Honduran Supreme Court defended the military's actions on the basis that Zelaya had "acted against the Constitution's provisions,"

(*Malkin*), and therefore his removal was a defense of the law. However, Zelaya's proposed changes to the constitution would only have taken effect after the next election – meaning they would not have allowed him to run again (*Johnston*). The court's explanation was not accepted by many Hondurans, who expressed their discontent with months of mass demonstrations. When Zelaya attempted to re-enter the country by plane, thousands of citizens gathered peacefully at Toncontin International Airport to receive him (*López*). The military opened fire on the crowd with live ammunition, killing several protestors, and arresting thousands more in the ensuing chaos. The armed suppression of pro-Zelaya demonstrations reinforced the appearance of a military coup, undermining the attempts to make the conflict appear as a legal, constitutional, and democratic process. Even U.S. president Barack Obama stated publicly that Zelaya remained the “constitutional leader” (*Malkin*) of the republic. A later report by the Law Library of the U.S. Congress found that while Zelaya's proposal was not in accordance with the constitution, the more egregious violation was on the part of the military (*Gutiérrez*) in their response.

U.S. Involvement

Though the Obama administration publicly supported Zelaya's claim to the presidency, behind the scenes the United States cooperated clandestinely with the plotters. When Zelaya was flown out of the country, his plane took off from Soto Cano Airbase. Soto Cano hosts the headquarters for U.S.A.F. Joint Task Force Bravo alongside the Honduran Air Force Academy and was a staging ground for covert operations across Latin America throughout the Cold War. It would have been virtually impossible for this to have happened without both knowledge and consent from the United States, since U.S.A.F. personnel co-operate the control tower and other airport facilities (*Johnston*). Military cooperation between the United States and Honduras is not just professional – the two nations' military personnel are so close that they attend the same

parties (*Johnston*). At one such event the night before the coup, Colonel Kenneth Rodriguez, the United States military group commander for Honduras, met with the leader of the Honduran armed forces, General Vásquez. The official record of the meeting showed that the coming events were not discussed, but Col. Rodriguez advised Gen. Vásquez to “remain within the bounds of the constitution,” (*Johnston*). When President Obama condemned the coup, Col. Rodriguez reported that the Honduran military was “confused by the U.S.’s reaction and feel somewhat abandoned by us,” (*Johnston*) implying that the plotters expected the United States to support their efforts. Like many Latin American militaries, they saw part of their role as protecting their country from communism and maintaining good relations with the anti-Communist United States. Their decision to replace Zelaya with a more traditionally pro-U.S. president flows naturally from that position, even in the absence of positive confirmation from the target of their admiration. Shortly after the coup, Colonel Herbeth Inestroza of the Honduran army took an interview with the Miami Herald, where he admitted that the army’s actions were unconstitutional. Inestroza also stated that a relationship with a left-wing leader like Zelaya would have been “impossible” (*Johnston*) due to the military’s training – training it received from the United States.

The connections between the U.S. and local Honduran military is representative of Washington’s general Latin American strategy. As part of an effort to create effective militaries in the region – that is, militaries that can effectively suppress potential anti-capitalist movements – the United States hosts several universities and training camps for foreign soldiers. Hundreds of Honduran officers have attended the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies in Washington, D.C. (*Johnston*), and General Vásquez himself completed courses at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia during the height of the Cold War (*Johnston*). Many of the school’s

alumni went on to actively participate in brutally repressive regimes across Latin America, all backed to some degree by the United States. Dictators such as Chile's Augusto Pinochet and Roberto D'Aubuisson in El Salvador received millions in economic and military aid from the United States to suppress socialist insurgencies and protect their countries' traditional power structures. The explanation for supporting blatantly undemocratic governments was simple – in the Cold War mentality, every potential socialist government in the region was a theoretical national security threat (*U.S. Congress, Senate*) through which the Soviet Union could launch an attack. Though the United States could not directly intervene in every country, it developed the strategy of indirect control to prevent the spread of Communism and supposedly protect democracy. In reality, democratic liberties and human rights fell by the wayside. The rhetoric, too, was only a cover for the protection of United States business interests. Socialist reforms proposed by presidents such as Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile threatened the profits of banana companies (*Immerman*) and copper mines (*U.S. Congress, Senate*) respectively, owned by U.S. companies and subject to U.S. shareholders. The allusions to democracy and freedom were nothing but lip service – the military governments were almost universally more repressive and authoritarian than the socialists they ousted.

Economic interests, therefore, should be acknowledged as the primary factor shaping the attitude of the United States towards its southern neighbors. In the eyes of policy makers, free-market capitalism was (and remains) the ideal system because it protected the property and profits of United States companies. Any reforms or movements which menaced the ability of those corporations to extract maximum profit from the natural and human resources of the Latin American republics were, by definition, a threat to United States interests. There exists a natural alliance between the United States and the local elite in Honduras (*Sáenz*), who also benefit from

the exploitation of the Honduran people and land. Unfortunately for the people of Latin America, the economic status quo keeps them in extreme poverty. Honduras is one of the most unequal countries in the world, and roughly “60% of Hondurans” (*Thompson*) live below the national poverty line. The reforms Zelaya instituted prior to the coup were immensely popular among the nation’s poor, especially the minimum wage increase. However, they also cut into the revenue of the U.S.-backed elite – the corporations, *latifundia* owners, and landholders who dominate the country’s politics and economy (*Thompson*).

In the broader context of the history of U.S.-Latin American relations, it is unsurprising that Zelaya found no allies in the United States. Washington’s attitude toward any particular leader in the region is essentially inverse to how much their decisions benefit the poor – not because they are the enemy of U.S. policy *per se*, nor out of mindless hatred, but because any action which redistributes power and wealth downward within Latin America necessarily cuts into the northward flow. The Honduran coup was, in other words, completely characteristic of U.S.-Latin American relations. The only difference from the perspective of Washington was the degree to which U.S. operatives were directly involved. Honduran forces acted to protect United States interests almost entirely independently, using weapons largely provided by the United States, and operating with tactics learned at United States military schools.

The Response

A major change from the past, however, was the response from Latin America. The condemnation of the removal of a democratically elected leader was swift and near universal. President Óscar Arias of Costa Rica and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez backed Zelaya within 24 hours of the coup (*López*), followed over the next few days by virtually every head of

state in the region. President Arias played a lead role in the ensuing mediation efforts (*Sáenz*).

Later the same day, the members of ALBA met in Nicaragua to discuss potential countermeasures against the illegitimate government (*López*). On June 29th, President Chávez suspended petroleum shipments to Honduras, and all three of the state's neighbors blocked all trade (*López*). Soon after, the member states of OAS voted unanimously to suspend Honduras from the organization, blocked only by a veto from the United States. The OAS supported the return of Zelaya to his country and position, though the U.S. State Department criticized the president's attempts to re-enter, accusing him of inciting violent actions (*López*). While in the past United States intervention had been met with criticism from scholars and activists, the 2009 coup was widely denounced by a Pan-American audience, including national governments, non-governmental groups like the Federation of Latin American Journalists (*López*), and inter-governmental organizations such as ALBA and the OAS. Honduras marked a turning point in relations between the Northern Colossus and the southern Latin republics. Instead of facing isolated and disorganized nations, U.S. interests were now opposed by a unified political block which showed itself capable of coordinating rhetoric and punitive diplomatic measures against rogue states. Though ultimately the coup triumphed and Zelaya was prevented from retaking the presidency, the reaction proved that a united Latin America was able and willing to stand up and push back against Washington.

Conclusion

The question of constitutionality dominates the discourse surrounding the removal of Zelaya – whether the referendum was constitutional or not, or if the military was justified in breaking the law because it had the blessing of the Supreme Court. This argument is irrelevant and distracts from the real conflict, of which this incident was merely one battle. Businessmen

from both the North and the South cannot tolerate a president who increases operating costs by, for example, raising the minimum wage. Zelaya was not removed because of a constitutional dispute, but because he threatened the status quo supported by the political and economic elite, and his procedural misstep gave them a golden opportunity to remove him by force. Though his actions were clearly unconstitutional, if the military and their civilian allies genuinely cared about their Constitution, they would not have violated it so flagrantly to oust Zelaya.

The episode of history that took place in Honduras in 2009 is impossible to understand isolated from the broader trend of history. For the past five centuries, Latin American history has been the story of exploitation on a continental scale (*Galeano*). The banks of the United States are the current beneficiaries of the wealth extracted from South and Central America, following in the footsteps of a long line of imperialist powers. Washington removes leaders that threaten their business interests just as the Spanish Crown crushed the slave rebellion of Tupac Amaru to protect the precious gold mine at Potosí (*Galeano*).

The United States, unlike the Spanish Empire, does not employ colonial governors. Instead, it allies itself with local elites. They maintain an economic system which transfers immense material, industrial, and financial wealth out of their own countries and into the United States. In exchange, they receive a tiny sliver of the profits, but more than enough to live a life of outlandish luxury. This economy necessarily impoverishes the vast majority of Latin Americans, Hondurans included. The United States appeared to have perfected its imperial system – Zelaya was eliminated with little more than a wave of the hand, diplomatically speaking. In 2019, the United States used the similar methods to back the overthrow of Bolivian president Evo Morales and Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, who had jointly supported Zelaya and opposed United States business interests. Both attempts failed. People and their leaders across the

continent are beginning to understand how the United States rules them and how to oppose it. They will not allow the removal of the next Zelaya.

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