

Where the conspiracies are real

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Latin America got used to claiming the US was secretly behind all its problems. In many cases, that turned out to be entirely true.

The US needs Latin America next door, Herbert Matthews wrote in the *New York Times* back in 1959; it would only be a second-rate power without access to Latin American products and markets. From the early 19th century, the US regarded Latin America as its backyard, to be protected (and subdued) at all costs, a stance initially presented as neighbourly solidarity. In 1823 President James Monroe condemned European imperialism and declared a doctrine of “America for Americans”, but this soon became an instrument for the domination of South America by the US.

US expansionism in Latin America, sometimes violent, sometimes discreet, played such a large role in shaping the history of the continent that many still see the “black hand” of Washington behind every obstacle faced by progressive governments. Latin American governments wanting a scapegoat for domestic problems often express anti-imperialist views, and talk of conspiracies. It is not by chance that anti-US sentiment is strong on the continent that produced José Martí (1): it comes from more than 150 years of real interference, dirty tricks and genuine conspiracies, all signs of a desire to dominate.

Between 1846 and 1848, Mexico lost half its territory to the US. Between 1898 and 1934, the US military intervened 26 times in Central America, overthrowing presidents and installing others. During this period the US established dominion over Cuba and Puerto Rico (1898) and took control of Panama, formerly a province of Colombia, along with its canal (1903). This signalled the start of a phase of military imperialism to bolster “dollar diplomacy”, and of monopolisation of natural resources by enterprises such as the United Fruit Company, founded in 1899.

But US imperialism did not always involve force. Robert Lansing, US secretary of state under President Woodrow Wilson, wrote in 1924: “We must abandon the idea of installing an American citizen in the Mexican presidency, as that would only lead us, once again, to war ... we must open the doors of our universities to young, ambitious Mexicans and make the effort to educate them in the American way of life, in our values, and in respect for the leadership of the United States. ... these young people will come to occupy important positions and will eventually take possession of the presidency itself. And without the United States having to spend a single cent or fire a single shot, they will do what we want, and do it better and more radically than we ourselves would have done” (2). All this happened, though without making the military redundant. In 1927 the US marines established Nicaragua’s National Guard, and placed the future dictator Anastasio Somoza at its head.

During the cold war the US developed a doctrine of “national security”. The shockwaves of the Cuban revolution (1959), the emergence of Marxist guerrillas (in El Salvador and Colombia), liberation theology, the attempt to find a “Chilean road to socialism” (1970-3) and the Sandinista rebellion in Nicaragua (1979) all fuelled the US’s anti-communist crusade.

Getting their hands dirty

Thousands of recently declassified files reveal that the CIA — established in 1947 — and the Pentagon were prepared to get their hands dirty: they organised media campaigns to destabilise governments, financed political oppositions, strangled economies, infiltrated armed forces and supported counter-revolutionary paramilitary groups. The US actively supported coups in the region (Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1973, Argentina in 1976) or launched military invasions (Cuba in 1961, the Dominican Republic in 1965). Between 1959 and 2000 there were 638 attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, with poison, exploding cigars, trick cameras — the secret services did not lack imagination. Hundreds of Latin American officers were trained at the US Army School of the Americas. The US also invested agents and material (radios, interrogation manuals) in Operation Condor, launched

in 1975, which was effectively a transnational alliance of South American dictatorships to hunt down, torture and execute political opponents around the world (3).

The actions of the Nixon administration (1969-74) against Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende are a textbook case. Even before Allende took office on 3 November 1970, the CIA, the US embassy and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had put in place a huge network of secret operations to bring him down. From October, the CIA had contacted military officers prepared to mount a coup, including General Roberto Viaux. International economic boycott measures and sabotage (including financial support for a strike by truck drivers in October 1972) helped ripen the situation. The more conservative elements of the leadership of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and the Chilean right received generous financial support, as did the opposition press. According to a US Senate report, "the CIA spent \$1.5m in support of *El Mercurio*, the country's largest newspaper and the most important channel for anti-Allende propaganda" (4). Its owner then as now, Agustín Edwards, is a former CIA collaborator.

With the end of civil wars in Central America and the transition to democracy in the South, the US changed tactics. In the 1990s, the "Washington consensus" and the rise of neoliberal democracies in Latin America allowed the US to consolidate its hegemony by defending the free market. In 1994 President Bill Clinton proposed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Secretary of State Colin Powell revealed later that the US's objective was "to guarantee control for North American businesses over a territory which stretches from the Arctic to the Antarctic" (5). But the US had not reckoned on popular rejection of these policies, nor with the emergence of progressive governments, and in 2005 the FTAA project was rejected. Cooperation between Latin American countries strengthened (to the detriment of the US, which was excluded) with the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) in 2008 and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Celac) in 2011.

Barack Obama has retained some fundamental principles. The "national security strategy" of 2010 and 2015 underlines the fact that Latin America is still a priority region for the US, especially in terms of energy supply — hence the obsession with Venezuela — and military control of the continent. Since 2008, new bases (under the US Southern Command) and electronic surveillance systems have been established, thanks in particular to the unfailing support of Colombia. Pentagon experts still view the region in terms of the principles established by Nicholas Spykman in 1942 (6): a zone of direct influence incorporating Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America on one hand; and the major countries of South America (particularly Brazil, Chile and Argentina), whose union should be prevented, on the other. They consider the promotion of free trade agreements to be more effective for this purpose than more direct intervention (see [Trade imbalance](#)). The recent rapprochement between the US and Cuba, aimed at breaking the growing isolation of the US in the region and opening up a new market, is in line with this view (see [Some will be more equal than others](#)). Faced with a multi-polar Latin America, looking increasingly towards Asia and troubled by many social resistance movements, the US is turning to diplomacy to maintain control.

US soft power

To combat "populist" Latin American governments, the US mainly relies on soft power: using privately owned media to influence public opinion, and developing a network of NGOs and foundations paid tens of millions of dollars to "support democracy", a tactic inspired by the colour revolutions of eastern Europe. This March, Diosdado Cabello, president of Venezuela's national assembly, accused Miriam Kornblith, the National Endowment for Democracy's (NED) Latin America director, of financing the opposition and supporting anti-Chavista trade unions. Is this just Bolivarian posturing? No. In 1997 the *New York Times* reported that the NED had been created to do "overtly what the CIA had been doing covertly for decades" (7). Documents released by WikiLeaks show that the US has financed the Venezuelan operation ever since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1998 (8). In 2013 Ecuador's president Rafael Correa suspended all cooperation with the US Agency for International Development (Usaid) and his Bolivian counterpart Evo Morales expelled this "independent" organisation on the grounds that it was conspiring against him.

Yet the US State Department has not entirely abandoned its old methods, as is clear from the April 2002 coup against Chávez. In Honduras (2009), then in Paraguay (2012), "institutional" coups

were supported by local oligarchies, and by the US. The approach involves removing democratically elected leaders considered too independent, with the approval of sections of the national parliament. There may not be much difference between a conspiracy and political cunning.