

COLD WAR MEMORIES:  
LATIN AMERICA VERSUS THE UNITED STATES

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**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this article is to examine the different ways that Latin Americans and U.S. citizens have chosen to remember the history of the Cold War. Latin Americans have established “truth commissions” to establish the facts of what happened to their societies. They have also brought to justice military dictators and their followers who murdered and tortured Latin Americans. U.S. officials and citizens have declined to reflect on the U.S. role in Latin America during the Cold War. Scholars alone debate the meaning of the Cold War in Latin America.

**Keywords:** Cold War, US-Latin American relations, human rights, truth commissions, justice, history.

MEMORIAS DE GUERRA FRÍA:

AMÉRICA LATINA FRENTE A LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

**RESUMEN**

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las diferentes formas en que los latinoamericanos y los ciudadanos de Estados Unidos han optado por recordar la historia de la Guerra Fría.

Latinoamericanos han establecido "comisiones de la verdad" para establecer los hechos de lo sucedido a sus sociedades. También han llevado a los dictadores militares de justicia y sus seguidores que asesinaron y torturaron a los latinoamericanos. Funcionarios y ciudadanos de Estados Unidos se han negado a reflexionar sobre el parte de EE.UU. en América Latina durante la Guerra Fría. Los estudiosos debaten solo el significado de la Guerra Fría en América Latina.

**Palabras claves:** Guerra Fría, relaciones Estados Unidos-América Latina, derechos humanos, comisiones de la verdad, justicia, historia

## 1. Cold War Costs

The Cold War proved a gruesome time for Latin Americans. In the four decades that followed the overthrow of the constitutional government of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 over 200,000 Guatemalans perished in political violence. In tiny El Salvador, a country of only 5 million people, over 75,000 citizens died, principally during the 1980s. Over 500,000 citizens fled the country and another 500,000 were internally displaced by the political violence. Warfare ravaged Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s. On a per capita basis, Nicaragua lost more citizens during its Cold War than did the United States in the Civil War and all of its international wars combined. General Efraín Ríos Montt directed, between 1982 and 1983, the slaughter of over 40,000 Guatemalans, 80 percent of whom were Mayan people. Cruelty, death, and destruction were not limited to Central America. During *la guerra sucia* of the late 1970s, the Argentine military and associated death squads massacred 30,000 Argentines. Many of the dead assumed the title of *desaparecido*. The victims, sometimes alive, were often dumped into the frigid South Atlantic from airplanes. The forces of repression did not, however, achieve their goals. Argentine military officers boasted of plans to kill 50,000 people. General Augusto Pinochet (1973-90) and his minions did not ring up extraordinary death tolls (3,500 to 4,500) in Chile. Pinochet's acolytes specialized in incarceration and torture. Thirty-six-thousand Chileans submitted affidavits, alleging that they had been tortured, to a fact-finding commission. Scholars estimate that 100,000 Chileans were tortured while in the hands of Pinochet's security forces. Another 200,000 Chileans fled the terror and went into exile. These are astonishing figures for a country of 10 million. Michelle Bachelet, the popular and successful president of Chile between 2006 and 2010, endured the horror. Her father, a Chilean general, died of a heart attack after

being tortured. As a young woman, Bachelet was abused by the Chilean military (Rabe 2011: 36-174).

Putting a human face on this agony, telling the disturbing stories of the non-elite victims and their loved ones would take a long time. But evocative examples abound. Argentine parents had delivered to them by security forces the body of their daughter with a rat sewn inside her vagina. Rogelia Cruz Martínez, an architecture student, leftist, and former “Miss Guatemala,” suffered a similarly hideous fate in 1968. Her butchers publicly displayed Cruz’s mutilated and raped, naked corpse (Grandin 2004: 103). Ronni Moffit drowned in her own blood after her carotid artery and windpipe were severed by shrapnel. Moffit, a U.S. citizen, was accompanying Orlando Letelier, the former foreign minister of Chile, in a car in Washington D.C. in September 1976. Agents of the Chilean security force, DINA, operating under the aegis of the international terrorist network dubbed “Operation Condor,” detonated a remote-control bomb that killed Letelier and Moffit and wounded Moffit’s husband (Dinges and Landau 1980). Rufina Amaya Márquez witnessed the decapitation of her husband and heard her children scream for help in the village of El Mozote in El Salvador. Her husband and four children, which included María Isabel, 8 months, were among the 800 massacred by the El Atacatl Battalion in December 1981. Soldiers also tossed babies in the air and caught them on their bayonets (Danner 1994). José Liborio Poblete and his wife, Gertrudis Hlaczik, were tortured and then disappeared under the direction of the notorious Argentine sergeant Julian Héctor Simón, known as “*el turco Julian*.” The couple was disabled, with José having lost his legs in an automobile accident. The torturers taunted José calling him “cortito” and turned him into a bowling ball, rolling him down flights of stairs. Argentine security forces compounded the grief of the couple’s relatives by kidnapping the couple’s baby, Claudia, renaming her, and giving her to an Argentine military family.

Poblete's crime of subversion had been that he had written a petition calling on Argentine companies to hire a fixed percentage of disabled workers (Rosenberg 1991: 112-17).

Remarkably, political activists who were hunted down by right-wing security forces have gained political power in the twenty-first century. In addition to former President Bachelet of Chile, there is President José Mujica of Uruguay. Mujica was tortured during his 14 years as a political prisoner in Uruguayan jails. The past two presidents of Argentina, Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, sought safety deep in Patagonia during *la guerra sucia*. The brother of President Mauricio Funes of El Salvador was killed by police during a student protest in 1980. And Dilma Rousseff is president of Brazil, Latin America's largest country. In 1970, at the age of 22, Rousseff was incarcerated in a military prison, stripped naked, bound upside down, and administered electric shocks to her breasts, inner thighs, and head.

This "radical evil," to use Kant's words, that darkened Latin America during the Cold War was perpetuated largely by military dictatorships and allied "death squads." Various international investigative bodies or "Truth Commissions" established that, depending on the country—Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, or Argentina, the forces of the extreme right bore responsibility for 85 to 99 percent of the violence. During the period between 1950 and 1989, Latin America experienced 52 military *golpes de estado* (Smith 2012: 352-53). Especially during the 1970s and 1980s, Latin Americans throughout Central and South America endured under vicious military governments.

During the Cold War the United States covertly aided military officers in their seizure of power and then publicly supported them with weapons and counterinsurgency training. In the pursuit of Cold War, the United States destabilized governments in Argentina, Brazil, British Guiana, Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua,

and Uruguay. It tried but failed to destabilize two other countries—Cuba and Haiti. It also worked to strengthen repressive military-dominated regimes, like the Honduras of the 1980s, and police states, like the Uruguay of the 1970s (Rabe 2011).

The purpose of this article is not to recount the Cold War in Latin America, but to examine how Latin Americans and U.S. citizens choose to remember it. Latin America and the United States have reacted in different ways to the end of the Cold War. For Latin Americans, coming to terms with the meaning of the Cold War has been an ongoing process that has stretched into the twenty-first century. Latin Americans have established commissions to establish the facts of what happened to their societies during the forty-five year confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. For more than two decades, Latin Americans have been looking to locate their dead and find their missing children. Latin Americans have also gradually concluded that they must prosecute the perpetrators of evil, if they are to achieve peace and closure in their societies. “*Nunca Más*” has become a rallying cry in the region. The breaching of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1991 have not, however, prompted a similar pattern of reflection and soul-searching in the United States. The joy and satisfaction over the new found freedom of Eastern Europeans, the unification of Germany, and the breakup of the Soviet Union has superseded any qualms about the hurt and pain inflicted upon Cold War bystanders. U.S. officials have issued scattered apologies for Cold War decisions that destroyed the lives of Latin Americans. But no agency of the U.S. government has conducted a systematic assessment of the U.S. role in Latin America during the Cold War. The United States also continued to pursue an atavistic Cold War policy—hostility toward Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. However reluctantly, agencies like the CIA have gradually and incompletely complied with scholarly demands to release the

documentary record on Cold War policies toward Latin America. The release of records has not, however, prompted a public discussion about the past. Discussion of the U.S. war in Latin America is largely confined to the scholarly community.

## **2. Latin American Cold War Memories**

Argentina, the home of *la guerra sucia*, has led the way in historical inquiry. The generals and admirals that had murdered 30,000 Argentines left office in disgrace after the military debacle that was the war to liberate the Malvinas. Devastated by the embarrassing defeat and the military casualties, the Argentine public turned in fury against the junta. General Leopoldo Galtieri (1981-82) resigned as president and was replaced by a caretaker general who promised elections. Argentina's anti-Communist military leaders had demonstrated to the world that their leadership skills and competence were limited to torturing and murdering defenseless civilians. In 1983, Argentines elected Raúl Alfonsín (1983-89) of the Radical Party as president.

President Alfonsín named a *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP) to establish the truth about state terrorism in Argentina. In 1984, CONADEP, which was chaired by the renowned novelist and scientist Ernesto Sábato, issued its report from hell, *Nunca Más*. The report documented 340 secret detention centers and 8,960 "disappeared" persons. The report further concluded that the number of disappeared was substantially higher than 8,960. *Nunca Más* opened with an allusion to the destruction of European Jewry, noting that "many of the events described in this report will be hard to believe. This is because the men and women of our nation have only heard of such horror in reports from distant places." CONADEP also indicted the military's anti-Communist rationales, their national security doctrines, labeling them as "totalitarian" (CONADEP, 1984). *Nunca Más* served as an

inspiration to other crusaders for human rights throughout Latin America. Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala would issue similar reports in the 1990s on atrocities during the Cold War. In Brazil, the Archdiocese of São Paulo, under the brave leadership of Cardinal Paulo Evarista Arns, published in 1985 its report on state-sponsored torture and murder in *Brasil: Nunca Mais*. *Nunca Mais* was based on a purloined copy of the Supreme Military Tribunal's archive, which contained documents and photos produced by military courts against political prisoners (Evaristo Arns 1986). As Argentines began the search for the *desaparecidos* in mass graves, they developed forensic skills in exhuming and identifying bodies. Argentine anthropologists thereafter assisted other nations in Latin America in recovering and identifying remains. Argentines scientists worked, for example, in establishing that a massacre occurred in El Mozote in El Salvador (Cardenas 2010: 165-66).

President Alfonsín authorized the prosecution of junta members (six generals and three admirals) who tyrannized Argentina from 1976 to 1982. The military leaders were unrepentant, with Admiral Emilio Massera claiming he had fought a “just war” against terrorism. The chief prosecutor labeled the military leaders as “criminals” who ordered the murder and torture of innocent civilians. A panel of judges in a federal appellate court found five of the junta members guilty and sentenced them to prison. General Jorge Videla and Admiral Massera received life sentences. Three of the four acquitted subsequently received prison sentences from military courts. Argentines, including the mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, thereafter called for the prosecution of the military subordinates who had kidnapped, murdered, and tortured. Facing an increasingly mutinous and disloyal military, President Alfonsín decided to accept *punto final* (end point) and “due obedience” laws that would sharply curtail prosecutions. The due obedience law exempted military personnel below the rank of colonel from prosecution.

The Argentine president reasoned that he had to prevent another military *golpe* and safeguard Argentine constitutionalism. Arguing that Argentina needed to move forward and focus on economic development, President Carlos Saúl Menem (1989-99), Alfonsín's successor, pardoned the convicted officers and those who had been indicted. Impunity had seemingly triumphed over justice in Argentina (Wright 2007: 141-78).

Domestic and international developments combined to lead Argentines from the late 1990s on to once again reassess their Cold War past. Argentines were left aghast, when, on 9 March 1995, Captain Adolfo Scilingo, confessed on a popular television news show that he had participated in two of the weekly "death flights," dumping thirty living but drugged *desaparecidos* into the South Atlantic. The articulate Scilingo, who was now conscience-stricken, appeared handsome, educated, socially adept, and, wearing a suit by Christian Dior, well groomed. Less visually appealing on television, but equally horrifying, was the torturer Julio Simón, "*el turco Julian*." Simón, who attached a big swastika to his watch chain, was an opera fanatic and would listen to operatic music before commencing his torture sessions. He favored pushing sticks up the victim's anus while shocking them with 220 volts of electricity. Speaking directly to the camera, the unrepentant Simón said "the norm was to kill everyone and anyone kidnapped was tortured." He defended himself, asserting that he was fighting "terrorist hordes" and that "torture is eternal" and an "essential part of the human being." Such revelations, dubbed "the Scilingo effect," helped push Argentines into action (Feitlowitz, 1998: 193-255). A new organization, the children of the murdered and disappeared, joined with the Plaza de Mayo women to agitate for justice. Jurists also challenged the constitutionality of pardons and legal immunities, citing such issues as the stolen children and the legal concept of *habeas corpus*.



The Argentines received support in their quest for justice from the international legal community. Growing out of memories of the Holocaust, the principles of the Nuremberg trials, the adoption of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, and continued atrocities in places such as East Pakistan (Bangladesh), Cambodia, Guatemala, Uganda, Bosnia, and Rwanda, international lawyers and global leaders began to argue there was “universal jurisdiction” for crimes against humanity. Belgium adopted a law in 1993 giving its legal system jurisdiction over war crimes anywhere in the world. Italian and Spanish jurists initiated extradition proceedings against Latin American military officers, charging that they had killed European nationals in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón electrified the international legal community when, in 1998, he demanded the arrest and extradition to Spain of General Augusto Pinochet of Chile on crimes of murder, torture, and genocide. In 2005, Judge Garzón imposed a lengthy sentence on Captain Scilingo, who was residing in Spain, for the thirty murders he helped commit in the 1970s (Borzutzky 2007).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Argentine jurists have pursued the criminals who waged *la guerra sucia*. In 2001, an Argentine federal judge ruled the *punto final* and due obedience laws unconstitutional, reasoning they violated both Argentine and international law. The disappearance of persons was judged a crime against humanity and could not be amnestied. The court’s judgment, which was upheld by Argentina’s Supreme Court in 2005, received political support from President Néstor Kirchner (2003-07) and his successor and wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-). The government decreed that *Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA) in Buenos Aires would be transformed into a space for memory and the defense of human rights. Over 5,000 Argentines had been confined in the ESMA torture center. Ninety percent of those never emerged alive from the military facility.

Both the prominent and unpublicized perpetrators of murder and torture in Argentina faced justice. In 2002, General Galtieri was again indicted and put under house arrest; he died a few months later of a heart attack. In 2006, “*el turco Julian*” (Julio Simón) received a twenty-five-year sentence for the torture of a disabled couple and the theft of their child. In 2008, Luciano Benjamín Menéndez, the military commander who oversaw the notorious La Perla detention center in the city of Córdoba, received a life sentence for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of four political activists. In April 2010, an Argentine court convicted Reynaldo Bignone, a retired general and Argentina’s last dictator (1982-83), for the kidnapping, torture and murder of fifty-six people. Bignone, 82, received a twenty-five-year sentence. In late 2011, Bignone received an additional fifteen-year sentence for setting up in 1976 a secret torture center inside a hospital, where doctors and nurses were abused. In 2013, the military dictator, General Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-81), died in the Marcos Paz Prison in Buenos Aires. In 2010, General Videla received a life sentence for the murder of thirty-one political prisoners. Human rights activists also celebrated the life sentence handed down in 2007 to the Reverend Christian von Wernich, a Roman Catholic priest. Father von Wernich was present at torture sessions, helping extract confessions, while at the same time offering consoling words to family members seeking their loved ones who had been kidnapped. The conviction forced both lay and religious people to confront the Church’s complicity in Argentina’s sordid past.

International jurists also contributed to the movement for justice. In 1990, a jury in France convicted in absentia Navy Captain Alfredo Astiz for the disappearance of two French nuns. The nuns had been working with Argentine groups, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in trying to learn about the fate of the disappeared. Captain Astiz, who was known as the “Angel of Death,” for his youthful appearance, blonde hair, and ruthlessness, had infiltrated the

peace groups, claiming that he had a brother who had also disappeared. In late 2009, Argentine jurists began to process of putting Captain Astiz on trial for murder and subsequently convicted and sentenced Astiz to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity on 26 October 2011. In 2008, Spanish authorities arrested a Dutch-Argentine airline pilot, Julio Alberto Poch, who flew planes used to throw Argentines into the sea. In 2010, the Spanish High Court ordered the pilot's extradition to Argentina to face charges. He is now in an Argentine prison awaiting trial, charged with forty-one murders.

Chile's movement from impunity to justice followed a path similar to Argentina's. The callous General Pinochet dominated political life in Chile until 1998, long after the Cold War had ended. Under mounting domestic and international pressure, Pinochet had agreed to hold a plebiscite in 1988, giving Chileans a choice on whether they wanted a continuation of one-man rule. Chile's left and center political parties united in a political alliance known as the *Concertación* and urged Chileans to vote "no." The "no" vote triumphed by a decisive 55 to 43 percent. Pinochet relinquished the presidency, but he maintained substantial control. In 1978, he had declared a general amnesty for uniformed personnel. His constitution granted him the power to stay as commander-in-chief of the armed forces until 1998. The constitution also provided for non-elected senators, who were Pinochet's acolytes, to take seats in in the Chilean legislature. In 1990, the glowering Pinochet draped the presidential sash over Patricio Aylwin of the Christian Democrats. After twenty-seven years of military rule, Chile had returned to free elections and constitutional processes.

President Aylwin (1990-94) and his successor Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994-2000), the son of the former president, moved cautiously on human rights issues. Aylwin appointed a National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation headed by a veteran politician from the

Radical Party, Raúl Rettig. The Rettig Commission lacked subpoena power. It was authorized only to investigate deaths at the hands of state agents. It could not name perpetrators of crimes, and it could not investigate cases of arbitrary detention or of people who had been tortured but not murdered. Despite the restraints, the Rettig Commission provided a notable service to Chileans with its 1991 report. It documented over 2,000 deaths and disappearances. Subsequent investigations raised the death toll to over 3,000. The commission rejected the Pinochet fantasy that the country had been at war after the overthrow of Salvador Allende and demonstrated that most of the dead were unarmed civilians, not armed guerrillas. Even as the commission took testimony, its work was aided by the discovery in June 1990 of a mass grave in Pisagua, a port city in northern Chile. Chileans gasped as they looked at the mummified faces of the disappeared on television and in newspaper photographs. General Pinochet denounced the Rettig Commission as a “sewer” and boasted that the armed forces took pride in saving the country from terrorism and international communism. The government thereafter provided compensation to the families of the executed and disappeared but did not challenge the 1978 amnesty law. The only prominent Chilean officer prosecuted was Manuel Contreras of DINA who had overseen Operation Condor and the assassination of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffit in Washington in 1976. Contreras received, however, only a light sentence for his crime (Wright 2007: 179-224).

After 1998, Chileans began to engage directly with the past. General Pinochet stepped down as military commander, twenty-five years after he seized power, and took his seat in the legislature as “a senator for life.” The audacious action infuriated the families of the victims and the hundreds of thousands of Chileans who had been arbitrarily detained or tortured. As a senator, Pinochet would also preserve his impunity. In September 1998, the cocky general

travelled to London for a back operation. Spain's Judge Garzón seized the moment. Armed with the extradition treaty that existed between Spain and the United Kingdom, Garzón issued a warrant for Pinochet's arrest. On 16 October 1998, British authorities arrested Pinochet, and he was kept under house arrest for the next sixteen months as the Spanish, British, and Chileans wrangled over the legal and jurisdictional issues. The British Foreign Office eventually shipped Pinochet home, ruling that he lacked the mental capacities to stand trial. Pinochet feigned illness, including dementia. But the once terrorized Chileans realized that their emperor no longer wore clothes. General Augusto Pinochet had become an epic international embarrassment (Roht-Arriaza 2005: 32-96).

After 2000, Pinochet would constantly find himself barraged with criminal cases and would lose his legal immunity and his senatorial seat. Chileans' fury mounted when they learned that Pinochet and his henchmen had stashed cash in banks around the world. Pinochet's secret bank accounts amounted to \$28 million. Claiming their client's ill health, lawyers kept Pinochet out of a Chilean jail. The dictator died in late 2006 at the age of ninety-one. Pinochet's military colleagues were not as fortunate. A Chilean judge, Juan Guzmán, successfully argued that the amnesty law did not exempt from prosecution those who had "disappeared" Chileans, because, under a writ of *habeas corpus*, the lack of a body meant that the kidnapping was an ongoing crime. Latin America's military dictatorships and death squads had thought they were clever when they "disappeared" victims or disfigured bodies beyond recognition. They were confident that they would never be prosecuted, because evidence no longer existed. By the end of 2006, over 100 Chileans, including numerous generals, had been convicted of disappearing Chileans. Manuel Contreras of Operation Condor received a life sentence in 2008 for the assassination of Chilean General Carlos Prats and his wife in a car bomb attack in Buenos Aires in 1974. In late

2012, a Chilean judge charged eight retired military officers for the murder of the popular folk singer, Víctor Jara. A day after the overthrow of President Allende, Jara was arrested and transported to Chile Stadium where he was tortured and shot forty-four times with machine-gun bullets.

Beyond prosecuting its criminals, Chile took a variety of other measures to come to terms with its ghastly past. President Ricardo Lagos Escobar (2000-06), Chile's first socialist president since Allende, appointed a new commission, known as the Valech Commission, to listen to those who had been tortured. Over 36,000 Chileans came forward to provide evidence of torture. The commission also identified over 1,000 detention and torture centers. The most notorious torture center, Villa Grimaldi, was transformed into a memorial for Pinochet's victims. Both President Bachelet and her mother had been tortured at Villa Grimaldi. Chileans also renamed another notorious place of torture, Chile Stadium, "Estadio Víctor Jara," after the murdered folk singer. And Chile erected a statue of Salvador Allende in the Plaza de la Constitución, near the presidential plaza, La Moneda (Stern 2010). Finally, Chileans exhumed the bodies of notables, such as poet Pablo Neruda, the Nobel Laureate, to determine whether they died of natural causes or were poisoned by followers of General Pinochet (Stavans 2013).

The truth commissions in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador documented atrocities and assigned responsibility for the carnage to the anti-Communist agents of the state. Analysts have noted, however, that these commissions avoided an extensive discussion of the political and social context in which the violence took place. Fears of another military *golpe* imposed caution on the fact finders. In Guatemala, the multivolume study, *Memoria del silencio*, compiled by the Comisión para la Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), broke from that circumspect approach. International pressure brought an end to the country's civil war in 1996. The United Nations

designed the structure and composition of the Guatemalan commission. Beyond attributing to state security forces over 90 percent of Guatemala's 200,000 deaths, *Memoria del silencio* explicitly repudiated "the theory of the two demons." The dead were not "collateral damage," having been caught in the crossfire between two warring armies. Agents of the state had targeted people because they were union leaders, rural organizers, and student activists who protested repression in Guatemala and wanted freedom and social justice. The military regimes also perpetrated racist, genocidal policies against the Mayan. The United States bore responsibility for the violence that swept over Guatemala for four decades. As the report noted, after the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, "there was a rapid reduction in the opportunity for political expression." A "fundamentalist anti-communism" thereafter inspired legislation that "consolidated the restrictive and exclusionary nature of the political system." The Cold War policies of the United States received an enthusiastic welcome from elites and right-wing political groups in Guatemala. The United States backed military regimes and directed its military assistance "towards reinforcing the national intelligence apparatus and for training the officer corps in counterinsurgency techniques, key factors which had significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation." Indeed, the United States fostered "criminal counterinsurgency" with its anti-Soviet strategy in Latin America (CEH 1998).

Releasing historical analyses that interpret violence within a political and social context does not guarantee the pursuit of justice. President Alvaro Arzú, sitting next to his military commanders, showed no emotion as the head commissioner, Dr. Christian Tomushat of Germany, presented the report to a packed audience in Guatemala's National Theatre on 25 February 1999. President Arzú declined to step to the podium to accept *Memoria del silencio*. A year before, the archdiocese of Guatemala City, led by Bishop Juan José Gerardi, released its

four-volume study, *Recuperación de la memoria histórica*, which recounted the military's atrocities against the Guatemalan people (ODHAG, 1999). A few days after the release of the report, assailants bludgeoned to death Bishop Gerardi. The bishop's face was so disfigured that his corpse could be identified only by his episcopal ring.

Guatemala has not initiated a comprehensive campaign to identify and prosecute its murderers and terrorists, although it did convict three mid-level military officers for the murder of Bishop Gerardi and, in 2012, a Guatemalan court issued a life sentence (6,060 years) to a soldier for his role in the massacre of 201 Mayan peasants in the village of Dos Erres in 1982. The convicted soldier's commander-in-chief, President Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), is still not in jail for overseeing the destruction of Mayan communities. But the former president and military general no longer breathes with impunity. In 1999, Rigoberta Menchú, the Guatemalan human rights activist and indigenous leader who received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992, filed charges of genocide against Ríos Montt in a Spanish court. A Spanish judge subsequently issued an international warrant for the arrest of Ríos Montt. Guatemala refused, however, to extradite the former president, who had been a member of the Guatemalan Senate (Garrard-Burnett 2010). Facing both international and domestic pressure, Guatemala finally put the old dictator, 86, on trial in 2013. The testimony was horrifying, with one man recounting how the military killed his wife and two children, slashing his 5-year-old son's face with a machete and smashing his toddlers head (Malkin 2013). A Guatemalan tribunal, on 10 May 2013, found Ríos Montt guilty of genocide against the Mayan people and sentenced him to eighty years in prison. But within two weeks, Guatemala's Constitutional Court overturned the conviction on a technicality. The nation's conservative oligarchy and business elite had vehemently opposed the trial. Ríos Montt may be retried in the future.



Other Latin American countries have not fully confronted their Cold War past.

Uruguay's truth commission documented 164 disappearances between 1973 and 1984 during the military dictatorship. But responding to political and military pressure, the commission declined to say that the practice of disappearing people was official policy. In the 1980s, Uruguayans approved, both legislatively and via a plebiscite, amnesties for the military and leftist guerrillas. The amnesty applied only to crimes committed in Uruguay. Uruguayan authorities have prosecuted officers who participated in Operation Condor, such as General Gregorio Alvarez (1981-85), Uruguay's last dictator, who received a twenty-five-year sentence on 22 October 2009 for involvement in thirty-seven homicides and human rights violations. On 19 October 2009, Uruguay's Supreme Court declared the amnesty law for the military unconstitutional in reference to a specific case. In July 2011, dictator Juan María Bordaberry (1972-76) died under house arrest, having previously received a thirty-year sentence for human rights crimes from an Uruguayan court. In May 2013, General Miguel Dalmao received a twenty-eight year sentence for the murder of a leftist university professor in 1974.

South America's most influential nation, Brazil, has not officially assessed the era of military dictatorship (1964-85). The study, *Nunca Mais*, produced by the archdiocese of São Paulo remained the most comprehensive assessment of murder and torture in Brazil. The military amnesty law of 1979 has not been repealed or declared unconstitutional by Brazilian courts, although in 2010 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Cost Rica judged the amnesty invalid. Brazilian authorities did not investigate deaths, disappearances, or torture during the military dictatorship. Brazil has shown remarkable economic growth in the twenty-first century, and Brazil became a leading voice in global economic affairs, especially under the leadership of the working-class hero, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), known

popularly as “Lula.” President Lula disappointed Brazil’s human rights community by not establishing a truth commission to establish responsibility for military-era crimes. The able Brazilian leader was aware of the past. His minister of culture was Gilberto Gil, the internationally renowned recording artist who was forced into exile by the Brazilian military. The president’s chief of staff was Dilma Rousseff. As a young woman, Rousseff resisted Brazilian military rule, was captured, and spent three years in prison on charges of participating in an armed militant group. In 2012, President Rosseff (2011-) established a truth commission to investigate human rights abuses perpetrated by the military dictators. The commission is scheduled to report its findings in 2014 (Romero, 2012).

### **3. Apologies**

Noteworthy apologies emanated from Latin America’s historical thinking. In February 2009, the president of Guatemala, Álvaro Colom (2008-12), apologized to Cuba on behalf of his country for having allowed the CIA to train Cuban exiles in Guatemala for the invasion of the Bay of Pigs. On his official visit to Havana, Colom also awarded Guatemala’s highest honor to Fidel Castro. In 2011, President Colom apologized to the son of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1952-54) for the “great crime” that was the CIA-sponsored overthrow of the constitutional presidency (Malkin 2011). In tribute to the deposed leader, Colom renamed a main highway after President Arbenz. In 2012, President Mauricio Funes of El Salvador acknowledged the government’s responsibility for the massacre of 936 civilians in the village of El Mozote in 1981. He called the counterinsurgency operation by the nation’s military “the biggest massacre of civilians in the contemporary history of Latin America.” President Funes

also asked for forgiveness from the relatives of the estimated 12,000 people who disappeared during the 1980s civil conflict, which left 75,000 dead (Associated Press 2012).

In Cuba, which had become an internationally insignificant country in the post-Cold War era, nostalgia reigned. In 1997, on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, the body of Ernesto Che Guevara was “discovered” buried under the runway at the airfield in Valle Grande, Bolivia. Bolivian authorities delivered Che’s remains to Cubans who transported the remains back to Cuba. After a grand ceremony extolling Che’s virtues, the Cubans returned the body to earth in Santa Clara. Troops commanded by Che had liberated the Cuban city in late 1958. Che had passed on to becoming an international symbol of romantic revolution. He was further associated with the optimistic times of the 1950s and 1960s. Forgotten was the pathetic, foolish mission that led to Che’s death in Bolivia. Yearnings for the symbolic Che were highlighted by the release of two feature films about Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) with the Mexican heartthrob, Gael García Bernal, and the four-hour epic, *Che* (2008), starring Benicio Del Toro. Websites marketed Che memorabilia. T-shirts adorned with Che’s visage were especially popular.

Latin Americans were not the only people issuing apologies for the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere. In 1999, during a visit to Guatemala, after the release of *Memoria del silencio*, President Bill Clinton observed that it was “imperative” that he address the report. In frank language, Clinton said: “For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engage in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake.” Secretary of State Colin Powell also suggested that there were Cold War activities that did not bring credit to the United States. In 2003, Secretary Powell addressed the U.S. role

in the overthrow of Salvador Allende, noting “it is not a part of American history that we are proud of.” The Chilean government of President Ricardo Lagos responded that it was pleased that the United States “now considers it was an error” to have supported the military *golpe* that overthrew President Allende (Rabe 2011: 187).

#### **4. U.S. Cold War Memories**

Sporadic expressions of regret about the U.S. role in Latin America in the Cold War did not inspire demands for investigations and accountability. In the realm of public discourse, joy and satisfaction over the demise of the Soviet Union and the liberation of Eastern Europe crowded out thoughts about the dear prices that Latin Americans paid during the Cold War. Happy reenactments of the breaching of the Berlin Wall, as took place on 9 November 2009, the twentieth anniversary, sent the message that the West had acted nobly and bravely in confronting the Soviet Union and communism. Photographs of Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Lech Walsea of Poland, and Mikhail Gorbachev of the former Soviet Union together in the new Berlin in a united Germany delivered the message that the Cold War was a “good war.”

Only the continuing presence of Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon’s sidekick, caused some to think about U.S. actions in Latin America. Kissinger enjoyed a position as a sage and thoughtful commentator on international affairs, who was consulted by influential journalists and asked to appear on high-toned public affairs television programs. But the iconoclastic public intellectual, Christopher Hitchens, called for Kissinger to face war crimes trials for his decisions and policies, including his involvement in the assassination of General René Schneider of Chile (Hitchens 2001). Kissinger has also faced calls from international jurists in Argentina and Chile to testify about his involvement with Operation Condor and the overthrow of Salvador Allende.

Kissinger, through his lawyers, issued the vague response that he wished to “contribute what he can from his memory of those distant events.” In his memoirs, Kissinger went to great lengths to absolve himself of responsibility for horrors in South America. Kissinger has also faced a little trouble abroad. In 2001 a French judge sent police officers to Kissinger’s hotel in Paris to serve him with a request to answer questions about U.S. involvement in the Chilean *golpe*. French citizens had disappeared during the Pinochet era. Kissinger refused to respond to the subpoena, referred the matter to the Department of State, and flew on to Italy (Rohter 2002).

One U.S. casualty of the Cold War in Latin America was the infamous School of Americas. By 2000, the school had trained over 60,000 members of the Latin American military. An analysis of the Truth Commission for El Salvador report demonstrated that 75 percent of the military officers cited for involvement in major massacres in El Salvador had trained at the School of Americas. Other criminals who had studied at the school included Leopoldo Galtieri of Argentina and Efraim Ríos Montt of Guatemala. Roman Catholic peace activists, who opposed U.S. policies in Central America in the 1980s, had consistently called for the closing of the facility. In the 1990s, Representative Joseph Kennedy, the son of the former attorney general and the nephew of President Kennedy, took up their cause. Representative Kennedy, who represented the state of Massachusetts, pressured the U.S. military to declassify training manuals used at the school. The manuals referred to tactics of false imprisonment, abuse of prisoners, torture, and the “neutralization” or assassination of suspects. The Department of Defense discontinued the use of the manuals in 1996. Kennedy and his successors annually attempted to cut off funds for the school, finally succeeding in 1999. The Clinton administration closed the School of the Americas in 2000 but reopened it in January 2001 as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. The new school, located at Ft. Benning in

Georgia, claimed that it emphasized democracy and human rights to its military enrollees from Latin America (Gill 2004).

The United States has given haphazard assistance to the hunt for murderers and torturers who fled their country. In 2007, the human rights community hailed the arrest in the Washington D.C. area and subsequent extradition to Argentina of Ernesto Guillermo Barreiro. Major Barreiro was the chief interrogator at the La Perla detention center in Córdoba. The new Barack Obama administration (2009-) has been somewhat forthcoming on human rights issues, extraditing alleged criminals to El Salvador and Guatemala. The U.S. legal system failed, however, to convict Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban exile and former CIA asset who is wanted in Cuba and Venezuela on charges of masterminding the destruction a Cuban airliner in flight in 1976, killing 73 people. Twenty-four members of Cuba's national fencing team, as well as a Guyanese child, died in the explosion. Posada, who trained in explosives and sabotage at the School of the Americas in the 1960s, publicly denied involvement in the destruction of Cubana Airlines Flight 455 or that he organized terrorist attacks on tourist facilities in Cuba in 1997 that killed and injured European tourists. Posada has lived freely in Miami since 2007, where he has support among anti-Castro exiles. In 2007, a federal judge in El Paso, Texas dismissed immigration charges against Posada for illegally entering the United States in 2005. In April 2009, the Justice Department filed eleven new charges against Posada in federal court in El Paso, alleging he lied about the 1997 bombings and committed immigration fraud. In 2011, a jury in El Paso found the elderly Posada, 83, not guilty of all charges, even though jurors heard tape recordings of Posada discussing his role in the 1997 bombings (Frosch, 2011).

Luis Posada's ability to preserve his impunity pointed to the continuing Cold War between the United States and Cuba. The U.S. policy of hostility toward Castro's Cuba had

barely changed between 1989 and 2013, even though Fidel Castro no longer dominated Cuba. In mid-2006, Castro had become seriously ill and transferred leadership to his brother, Raúl, in 2008. Public opinion polls demonstrated that U.S. citizens believed the non-recognition policy and the trade embargo were anachronistic, and U.S. exporters, especially farmers, were eager to sell their goods in Cuba. Their views were seconded by human rights activists in Cuba who wanted democracy for the island.

U.S. political leaders constantly worried, however, about the reaction of Cuban-Americans to a détente with Cuba. Political conservatives also had fond memories of the Cold War and did not mind seeing it continue. In 1996, the U.S. Congress tightened the trade embargo against Cuba with the Helms-Burton Act. In 1999-2000, U.S. citizens engaged in a hysterical debate over whether little Elián González should be returned to his father and communism in Cuba. The child had been found clinging to an inner tube off the coast of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Elián's mother had tried to escape Cuba, but she and ten others drowned when their boat capsized. The Clinton administration followed international and domestic law and returned the boy to his father (Schoultz 2009: 419-567).

Whereas the Cold War persisted with Cuba, the United States abandoned its Cold War concerns about Central America. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the last theatres of the Cold War, were devastated countries. As measured on the 2012 U.N. Development Index of 187 countries, El Salvador ranked 107<sup>th</sup>, Nicaragua ranked 129<sup>th</sup>, Guatemala ranked 133<sup>rd</sup>. The three countries had low per capita incomes and miserable records on the provision of health and education to their people (United Nations 2012). Once the Cold War was over, the United States stopped focusing on the region. U.S. economic aid to Central America fell from \$1.2 billion in 1985 to \$167 million in 1996. The three countries depend on money sent home, *remesas*, from

Central Americans who had migrated to the United States. An estimated 25 percent of El Salvador's population lived in the United States in 2013, and *remesas* accounted for 18 percent of the country's gross domestic product. The U.S. prescription for Central America's economic health became trade, not aid. The United States has opened the U.S. market through the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) (2005). The Dominican Republic, another impoverished country in which the United States waged Cold War, joined CAFTA.

The sharp reduction in economic aid to Central America further indicated that there would not be much official thinking or regretting about the Cold War in Latin America. In the public realm, debates over the issue of access to the documentary record have been the U.S. equivalent of a truth commission. Scholars have made progress on the opening the official record. In 2003, the Historical Office of the State Department released a volume in its *Foreign Relations of the United States* series on the U.S. intervention in Guatemala. In 1983, the Historical Office published a volume on Latin America, 1952-1954, which included a section on U.S. policy toward Guatemala. Those documents did not demonstrate, however, that the United States had intervened in Guatemala (Rabe 2004). The National Security Archive based at George Washington University became a relentless advocate for declassifying documents on the Cold War in Latin America. The Clinton administration proved especially amenable to opening the record, authorizing major declassifications of records on U.S. policies toward El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In 1999, the administration, in response to the mounting international furor over General Pinochet, produced the Chile Declassification Project. The project yielded over 20,000 documents on U.S. policies toward Chile from 1973 to 1990 (Kornbluh 2003). In 2009, the State Department released in electronic form a volume on U.S. relations with Latin America during the first administration of Richard Nixon (U.S. Department of State 2009). The



electronic volume generated international publicity, because it demonstrated that President Nixon had asked Brazil's military government to enlist in the war against Salvador Allende. Isabel Allende, daughter of Salvador Allende, called on Brazil to open archives that might shed light on any role it played in the overthrow of her father (Associated Press 2009). U.S. and Latin American citizens have not, however, gained complete access to the documentary record. The new electronic volume on Latin America did not offer documents on the Nixon administration's attitude toward military governments in Bolivia and Uruguay. In addition, in May 2011, Republicans in the House of Representatives blocked a move by Democrats to release U.S. intelligence files on the Argentine military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. Argentine human rights activists argued that the secret documents might help them identify young people stolen as babies by the military junta.

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