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## Review Essay

# A Hot Cold War

**Russell Crandall**

### **Latin America's Cold War**

Hal Brands. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.  
£22.95/\$31.00. 408 pp.

When most observers reflect on Marxist revolutions in Latin America during the Cold War, they are understandably inclined to think about Fidel Castro's vaunted *barbudos* ('bearded ones') whose rural-based insurgency (or *foco*) was decisive in overthrowing the despised regime of Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista, and ushering in the country's Communist regime. Or these observers might imagine Salvadoran or Nicaraguan rebels in the 1970s and 1980s, who formed part of the conflict that set Central America on fire. Yet, a far less understood case of the tiny South American country of Uruguay reinforces the inescapable reality that Latin American revolutions were active throughout the Americas. By the early 1970s, Uruguay's urban guerrilla band, the Tupamaros, numbered around 2,000 combatants and support groups, a remarkable number given the country's population of only 2.9 million and its 12,000-strong military. The Tupamaros enjoyed considerable public support and relied on thousands of civilian sympathisers.

As he writes in his exceptional and subtly revisionist *Latin America's Cold War*, historian Hal Brands shows that Fidel Castro was hoping to spark 'another Cuba' along the lines of what had been achieved by 1959; Havana provided guerrilla-warfare training to around 1,500 of their Uruguayan *com-*

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*pañeros*; the Cubans also provided at least \$180,000 to fund the Tupamaros' clandestine and military activities. For Castro, this sort of revolutionary involvement was part of Cuba's unwavering commitment to 'never renounce her right and duty to collaborate with those who wish to change society when that is found to be impossible by the democratic method' (p. 105).

The aid allowed the Tupamaros to become a formidable fighting force that pursued increasingly aggressive operations, funded by Havana's largesse as well as through bank robberies and kidnappings. This guerrilla prowess helped turn normally peaceful Uruguay into a nightmare. Public confidence in the government plummeted and foreign investment poured out of the country, exactly what the guerrillas wanted. One Uruguayan security officer described the situation as many others on the political right throughout Latin American would: 'We are on the front line of a ... war against an indivisible and murderous enemy' (p. 109). And Uruguay was not alone in this sort of unfolding guerrilla drama. In neighbouring Argentina, estimates of guerrilla strength ranged between 15,000–30,000 combatants, a number comparable to Colombia's FARC insurgency at the height of its power in the late 1990s.

Brands contends that the threat to standing governments posed by 'dedicated revolutionaries' such as the Tupamaros was eminently real and 'hardly a specter conjured by paranoid or cynical *golpistas* (rightist coup plotters)' (p. 111). Explaining but never justifying, Brands concludes from this that it was hardly surprising that Latin American armed forces were inclined to respond to the guerrilla threat with their own ferocity: '*foquista* violence and Cuban support provided militaries, security services, and conservative elites with both a reason and a pretext for internal repression' (p. 55).

In the case of Uruguay, the outcome was not nearly as romantic or successful as the often university-educated Tupamaro leaders had hoped or expected. By the late 1970s, after suffering severe repression at the hands of the security forces, the guerrillas had been systematically wiped out in Uruguay. What is also interesting about the Uruguayan case is that, unlike the more thoroughly documented and controversial – either then or now

– insurgent wars in Central America happening at the same time, the US government did not play a significant role in this Uruguayan dirty war.

Brands's exhaustive book, researched using archives from more than a dozen countries, reminds us that, while the global Cold War was remarkable for its stability, considering that Washington and Moscow never engaged in a direct confrontation and nuclear stockpiles went unused, in the Third World – or 'periphery' – the struggle was quite 'hot'. For Latin America, Brands believes this meant that the superpower rivalry and foreign meddling (by Washington, Moscow, and Havana) dominated Latin America's 'external' relations while ideological polarisation, rapid swings between dictatorship and democracy, and wanton violence constituted the 'essential features of domestic politics' (p. 2). Brands's central conclusion is that this lethal cocktail of factors ensured the 'relentless intensity' of Latin America's Cold War.

### **'A frenzy of liberation'**

In Brands's depiction, while the Cold War in Latin America began in earnest after the Cuban Revolution, escalating US–Soviet tensions and growing domestic ideological polarisation had actually begun a decade earlier, after the end of the Second World War. Yet it was only when Castro began actively 'exporting' the Cuban revolution – and its unique brand of anti-Americanism and *tercermundismo* (or 'Third Worldism') – to other Latin American countries, that effectively all hell broke loose. Indeed, by the 1960s, Havana-backed insurgencies were active throughout the Americas; in some cases, such as Che Guevara's forage into Bolivia in 1967, Cuban forces were directly leading these nascent insurgencies that confidently assumed they could repeat the *barbudos'* recent feats.

For Brands, these insurgencies were decidedly rooted in ideology and domestic grievances, but they were nonetheless energised by the Cuban example. During these years, thousands of mostly young and idealistic budding guerrillas travelled to Cuba for training, with at least 1,000–1,500 making the trek in 1962 alone. According to a Cuban official, the central part of the country where many of the training camps were located resembled a 'frenzy of liberation' (p. 42).

All of these efforts to foment revolution allowed Castro to confidently predict in the early 1960s that Washington 'will not be able to hurt us if all of Latin America is in flames' (p. 41). Ultimately, though, the joke was on Castro, as almost all of these *focos* were defeated, as were the Tupamaros. Only the Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua ultimately prevailed to impose a Cuban-style revolutionary government. And, similar to the case in Cuba with the insurrection that ousted Batista, even this singular, ostensibly *foco* success was actually the result of a societal revolt against the country's dictator, Anastasio Somoza.

The case of Uruguay and the Tupamaros exemplifies how the political right and militaries in Latin America responded to the proliferation of armed insurgencies with their own violence, and at times terror and dirty wars. At the same time, in the post-Cuban Revolution era the United States also quickly concluded that 'subversive insurgency rather than overt aggression was the main threat in the Third World' (p. 47). And for President John F. Kennedy, this meant that Washington would use 'every resource at our command to prevent the establishment of another Cuba in this hemisphere' (p. 49).

This unfolding American response consisted of two core elements: the 'carrot' of economic development (manifested most notably through Kennedy's Alliance for Progress) and the 'stick' of aggressive counter-insurgency that, while the exception rather than the norm, included covert action and military intervention. Although its perceived enemy has changed (communism then, terrorism now), much of the nation-building and counter-insurgency Washington attempted to undertake in places such as Colombia, Bolivia, El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1960s and 1970s was not so drastically different in its mission from, for instance, more contemporary efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

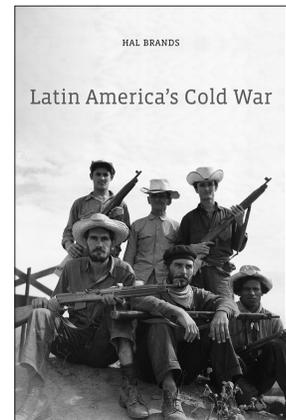
In 1962, around 9,000 Latin American soldiers graduated from American military-training institutions such as the School of the Americas, which at that point was located in the US-controlled Canal Zone in Panama. Washington also provided high-tech equipment, aerial surveillance, and advanced communications. Brands also tells us (although readers may have benefitted from more details) that the United States provided funds to help

start El Salvador's murky and repressive National Democratic Organisation (ORDEN) which oversaw the creation of a network of rural informers and served as an incubator of the country's 1970s and 1980s paramilitary death squads.

In an example of Brands's revisionism, he argues – counter to the conventional emphasis on US involvement – that the 'prominence of counter-insurgency was less a function of US pressure than the natural response to a growing (if sometimes exaggerated) threat' (p. 48). In the end, he contends, it was thus not US counter-insurgency assistance that was often decisive in defeating the radical left, but that 'the guerrillas did an excellent job of beating themselves' (p. 55). Brands believes that a good proportion of these self-inflicted wounds came about because the guerrillas were ultimately better suited to 'radicalizing the Right than radicalizing the masses' (p. 55).

Brands's analysis is bolstered by his ability to consider, for example, the agency of the Latin American actors, not just the Americans who are often assumed to be the omnipotent force in driving events (especially counter-insurgency) during the Cold War. He writes how Latin American militaries first learned of counter-insurgency doctrine from French and German trainers in the 1930s and 1940s, well before the American counter-insurgency thrust in response to the Cuban Revolution. For Brands, the grim but undeniable reality was that, amid the insurgencies that erupted and proliferated with Cuban training and assistance, 'no Latin American officer needed to be told to be anticommunist' (p. 48). In addition, Brands makes a critical distinction between US counter-insurgency assistance and training and the much more 'indigenous' National Security Doctrine philosophy that foretold the 'ascendancy of the assertive, ideologically driven military regime,' (p. 4) most notoriously in Guatemala and much of the Southern Cone.

Brands concludes that, while often effective in helping defeat the myriad Marxist insurgencies in the region, the US-supported counter-insurgencies



‘proved detrimental to democratic reform’ (p. 61) and helped provoke an ideological and diplomatic backlash that damaged Washington’s standing in the region. Brands might have added that the extent to which a US-manufactured counter-insurgency ‘blowback’ occurred depended on each case at hand. One could make a reasonable argument that US counter-insurgency training and support in Guatemala in the 1960s and 1970s had a far more morally and strategically dubious outcome than, for example, similar anti-insurgent training and assistance in Colombia, Bolivia, or El Salvador during roughly the same years.

As with El Salvador’s ORDEN example previously, what also might have been helpful here was to have more detail about the precise nature and impact of the assistance and training, and to what extent it actually did or did not corrode democracy or promote wanton violence, as scholars often assume. There is nothing wrong, *per se*, with Brands concluding that in El Salvador during the 1980s, Washington ‘backed a government that knew how to kill but was unwilling to reform’ (p. 203). Yet, we are provided with almost no evidence upon which to evaluate what are enormously consequential conclusions. This is an especially important case given that, unlike the case with successive military regimes in nearby Guatemala, the massive US ‘backing’ went almost overwhelmingly to a fledgling but democratically elected government under Christian Democratic president José Napoleón Duarte – a decidedly moderate leader despised by the country’s oligarchy.

### **Beyond the conventional**

Brands’s work is strengthened by its ability to look beyond the undeniably important and consequential counter-insurgency element in Latin America during the Cold War. For example, he provides astute treatment of how in the early 1970s Latin American diplomats took advantage of shifts in the global political economy – the American defeat in Vietnam, breakdown of Bretton Woods, and the oil shocks of 1973–74 – to promote part of the ‘Non-Aligned Movement’ in order to expand their countries’ diplomatic sway.

In what has also largely been forgotten amidst the conventional take on Washington’s Cold War hegemony, Brands also shows that at times governments in the region were able to treat Washington as they pleased, and

certainly not with the respect one accords to a major power. After it seized power in a coup in 1968, Peru's leftist military regime (an anomaly as most military regimes were rightist) seized US boats reported to be fishing in Peruvian waters and evicted the US military mission. According to one observer at the time, 'Peru nationalized IPC [a subsidiary of Standard Oil] and the Marines were not sent there' (p. 138). Interestingly, socialist president Salvador Allende in neighbouring Chile was impressed with what the Peruvians had done – and more importantly, that they had gotten away with it.

If there is a quibble with the methodology in this fine book, it has to do with Brands's use of a single quote or two to back up his assertions. So, for example, when explaining that Washington was often inclined to establish cosy relations with rightist military regimes in the region, Brands then cites an American official in the Dominican Republic who called that country's dictator Rafael Trujillo 'an authentic genius' (p. 15). The problem here is that this public or guarded view (which, we are not told) of one American diplomat does not automatically equal the overall intent and realisation of US policy.

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Brands believes that both that conservative and liberal observers have a mistaken or incomplete understanding of the Latin American experience during the Cold War. This includes the Right's mistaken conclusion that the events during this period are evidence of the good that can come from US intervention and democracy programmes. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, he says, the Left's contention is that the conflict was simply a 'savage crusade' conducted by Washington and its local reactionaries. Brands balances both of these ideologically rigid, morally soothing caricatures with a more balanced, but ultimately more powerful and lasting interpretation that it was instead a tragic yet complex interplay of foreign intervention, internal instability, and ideological extremism on both the Left and Right that ensured such a ruinous outcome for Latin America.

Brands concludes his book with the suggestion that in the study of Latin America in the Cold war 'perhaps detached narrative and analysis' are necessary. This is an important reminder given that scholars have often preferred to express their 'moral outrage' at the destructive outcome of the conflict – especially Washington's machinations and hypocrisy. None of this, of course, is to excuse the United States from its involvement and culpability in what were at times dark episodes with potentially far-reaching consequences. Yet, Brands's excellent book helps us move towards a more objective and detached understanding of Latin America during this tempestuous time – warts and all.