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From Chaos to Stability: U.S. Policies and Interests in Honduras

By

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December 23, 2004, a bus passes through the rough and rugged road on the way back to the suburbs of San Pedro Sula before Christmas. The bus carried 60 passengers, many of which were young children with their mothers who were carrying Christmas gifts they had bought in the city, and others were workers in the maquilas, or textile factories, who were heading home after a long day’s work. As they were traveling, the driver, Guillermo Salgado Pineda, noticed two cars stopped ahead of him, and as the bus went along one of the cars cut off the bus and stopped in front of it while the other boxed it in from behind. Two men emerged from the pickup in front of the bus, one carrying an M-16, and the other an AK-47, both of which are military assault rifles. The driver and passengers waited inside the bus to see what would happen, it could be that they stopped them to collect a tax from the driver and rob the passengers, but they would not be that lucky on this night. Without saying a word, the men opened fire on the bus, ignoring the screams of women and children until they finally settled. According to survivor reports, one of the men, Ever Anibal Rivera Paz, boarded the bus shortly after. He walked down the aisle poking bodies with the bodies with his M-16 asking if they were still alive and those who showed signs of life were shot again. This attack ended with twenty-eight people wounded and another twenty-eight dead, the oldest of which was sixty-eight, and the youngest, fourteen months old. Along with the corpses in the bus and on the street, the attackers left a note on the hood of the bus. “Feliz Navidad.”¹ The transnational gang known as MS-13 was responsible for this attack, and it is thought that this attack was in response to an increase in anti-gang policy from the government.² The message was clear, if the government tries to interfere with gang activity, it would be the people of Honduras who would suffer. Ever since the end of the Cold

² Tom Diaz, No Boundaries (Ann Arbor, 2009), 165-166.
War, Hondurans have been caught in the crossfire of gang violence, and a corrupt government. Through an examination of U.S. interests in Honduras, we can determine how stability in the country was heavily influenced by U.S. policy. Honduras went from being a stable state surrounded by countries fighting civil wars during the Cold War, to now being one of the poorest and most violent country in the world.

In order to understand how Honduras deteriorated into its current state, one must first know the origins of the nation. After fighting in wars for independence from the Spanish in the early 19th century, Mexico and Central America finally had their freedom in 1821. By 1824, the nations of Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica had come together to establish the United Provinces of Central America, and in November of that year they signed their first constitution. The United Provinces eventually failed and dissolved in 1838 due to an inability to balance the different needs of five nations.  

Although Central America was now divided, one of the main goals of the early Honduran government was to work towards reuniting the nations of Central America. Honduras struggled to establish a strong governing body due to voter fraud and civil revolts throughout the country. The presence of caudillo leaders separated the country into regions where citizens were loyal to those who could best protect them, this lead to conflicts between caudillos within Honduras, and without a strong national authority, little could be done to stop it. Caudillos were prominent figures across Latin America, they were charismatic men who relied on military strength and personal networks for their power. For Honduras this meant that elections were uncommon

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during early state formation as other Caudillos would fight for control. Caudillos would continue

to feature in Honduran politics, which promoted bribery and corruption, another notorious figure

in the politics of the country. It wasn’t until the reign of President Marco Auerlio Soto from

1876-1883, that Honduras began to modernize its government and the nation itself. An improved
tax system allowed for infrastructure such as roads, seaports, and other public works projects to
be put in place in order to maximize exports and improve the overall economy. The government
also encouraged citizens to buy land to grow agriculture and also began allowing foreign

investors into the country to further stimulate the economy, and so began the rise of the banana
market on the North coast of Honduras.\footnote{Ibid., 197}

The emergence of the banana market in Honduras also introduced a new elite class to the
country. The majority of wealth in Honduras had traditionally been located in the center of the
country, especially in Tegucigalpa. The foreigners in the North were bringing in so much money

that their wealth quickly rivaled the old money of Tegucigalpa. In Honduras the big banana

plantations were owned by the United Fruit Company, Standard Fruit, and Cuyamel Fruit

Company, and these U.S. enterprises had accumulated so much wealth that in 1919 the

Honduran government asked United Fruit for funds to put down a rebellion.\footnote{Jason M. Colby, \textit{The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America} (Ithaca, 2011), 124.} This economic

power allowed for the large plantations to have an incredible amount of political influence, and

so were able to grow with little interference from the government.

Now that American money had made its way into Honduras, the watchful eye of the U.S.
government turned its attention to the Central American nation. Fruit companies used their

influence both in the U.S. and Honduras to exploit land rights, and workers pay in order to
maximize their profits. A history of government corruption allowed for the process of expansion to be relatively easy for these enterprises, so banana companies would try to align their interests closely to those of the Honduran political leaders.

One way in which the banana companies would align themselves with the government was through infrastructure. The government would give concessions to American businessmen to build railroads because in addition to exporting product more efficiently, rail lines could serve to unite the country. But since Honduras is very mountainous, it limited the ability for railroads to be built, especially going from east to west, but the companies still managed to get from their plantations to the port cities on the Caribbean coast. The Honduran government paid John Trautwine, a US railroad builder, to build a railroad line that lead inland, to the capital. Trautwine was paid by the mile to make this railroad, and so he decided to make it as long and windy as he could, until the contract money ran out, and the rail line was left unfinished. Trautwine went home happy and rich, meanwhile the Honduran government had just spent needed money on a now useless railroad, and the capital was still isolated on its hilltop. This is just one example of how U.S. businessmen recognized Honduras’ dependency on the money they bring into the country, and used that as a tool to exploit government officials. Land concessions for plantations and railroads were often made at the expense of the Honduran people, specifically indigenous groups such as the Lenca, who were displaced because of land concessions made for American banana plantations. Although Trautwine exploited the Hondurans, having his railroad was better than not having one at all. Without the Americans, it

7 Ibid., 57.
8 Lester Langley and Thomas Schoonover, The Banana Men (Lexington, 1995), 44.
could’ve taken years for railroads to be built. Americans would continue take advantage of Honduras’ dependency on their business.

If the banana companies weren’t being supported as much as they would like, they were not afraid to take matters into their own hands and establish a different government that would ally with them. For example, Manuel Bonilla was President of Honduras from 1903 until 1907 and was closely allied to the banana companies, especially Cuyamel, and their founder Sam Zemurray. Bonilla’s successor, Miguel Dávila, chose to focus on the people of Honduras rather than the Americans who had all the money. Zemurray was not happy that he wasn’t able to bribe Dávila like he could with Bonilla, so he worked with American Mercenaries to try and get him back in power. His first attempt was in 1908, but Dávila was ready for his attack on Puerto Cortes, an important export town for the banana industry, and fought off their first attempt. Zemurray and Bonilla went back into hiding and revised their plan of attack, and in 1910 they launched another attack on Puerto Cortes, which was successful. This allowed the rebellion to start making its way inland and gain support from the armed forces in Honduras, and eventually Bonilla took back the position as president.\(^\text{10}\) Zemurray was compensated for his help in getting Bonilla back in power, with 24,700 acres on the North coast of Honduras, and other concessions.\(^\text{11}\) Zemurray was known for deposing governments across Central America, and implementing new governments that would allow him to use as much land as he wants.

Bonilla would recruit American soldiers of fortune, like Lee Christmas, who would be handsomely paid if they were able to get their employer into power. Soldiers of fortune would work closely with Honduran leaders to try and consolidate power in the country. Christmas


\(^{11}\) Lester Langley and Thomas Schoonover, The Banana Men (Lexington, 1995), 140-149.
would go on to become the Chief of Police in Tegucigalpa for a few years before returning to the
U.S. This was another way Americans would benefit off the corruption in Honduran politics,
and their participation only served to the detriment of the Honduran state.

While Americans in Honduras shaped the political life, those who stayed in the U.S.
affected the banana trade in other ways. New Orleans was the major shipping port for the arrival
of bananas into the U.S., and it was controlled by the mafia. According to historian Fred Cook,
by 1890, “No banana freighter could be unloaded until a fixed tribute was paid by the importer to
the firm of Antonio or Carlo Matranga.” Banana and other fruit shipments were big targets for
the mafia because the product had to be taken off the freighters quickly otherwise it would rot,
which encouraged larger banana companies to create alliances with the mafia. This alliance
between mafia leaders and banana enterprises flourished under the reign of Carías, because of his
close ties to American businessmen, in particular Zemurray who had come to be the major
shareholder of United Fruit in 1930. In the 1930s the New Orleans Mafia was smuggling drugs
into the country, and one of their biggest exporters was none other than Honduras. U.S.
authorities suspected Carías’ Vice President, the Honduran consul in New Orleans, and former
New Orleans Police Chief Guy Maloney of being involved in the drug trade. Maloney already
had experience in Honduras. He, like Christmas, helped Zemurray in the deposition of President
Dávila in 1911 to make way for Bonilla. The goal for men like Maloney and Zemurray was
personal advancement, and it didn’t matter who or what would be negatively impacted, so long

12 “General Lee Christmas, A Dumas Hero in Real Life” New York Times, 15 January 1911,
https://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/97137908/44BEB7EF8E574203PQ/48?accountid=14703
13 The Matranga brothers worked for Joe Macheca, who was the mafia boss in New Orleans
during the rise of banana enterprises. Fred Cook, Mafia! (Minneapolis, 1973), 33.
14 Peter Dale Scott, Cocaine Politics (Berkeley, 1998), 52-55.
as they continued to make money. The alliance between the mafia, plantation owners, and corrupt Honduran politicians would continue through the 1970s.

Political positions became more and more desired by the people of Honduras because if they were willing to cooperate with the banana companies, they knew they were going to be well compensated. The height of what came to be called banana politics was during the second presidency of Tiburcio Carías Andino from 1933 until 1949. Once in power, Carías sought to change the law to better maintain power, such as eliminating term limits. He worked closely with the United Fruit company, and together they were able to consolidate power in the country.\textsuperscript{15}

Although his reign was authoritarian, Carías was able to hold onto power for so long because he still served the needs of the rural communities. He was the epitome of the modern caudillo, he protected those under his rule, and helped his friends, the fruit companies. His goals were not only personal, Carías strived to create a stronger Honduran state, and did so by institutionalizing the National Party of Honduras. With the help of American military aid, Carías also established its Air Force and other national security forces. He also helped centralize power in the presidency, and balanced the national budgets. By giving land concessions to banana companies, transportation and communication infrastructure improved across the country. Thomas Dodd, author of \textit{Tiburcio Carías: Portrait of a Honduran Politician Leader}, argues that “Carías gave Honduras order but not progress.”\textsuperscript{16} Leaders similar to Carías rose to power throughout Central America, like Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador and Jorge Ubico in Guatemala, but what separated Carías from those other leaders is he was much less repressive. Carías unified and stabilized Honduras at a time when surrounding nations were

\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Dodd, \textit{Tiburcio Carías: Portrait of a Honduran Politician Leader} (Baton Rouge, 2005), 57.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, 239.
entering into civil wars and brutal violence, this political environment would continue in Central America throughout the Cold War.

The Cold War brought revolutions and violence across Latin America, and the United States was heavily involved. Due to the conflict with the Soviet Union, American leaders saw the world as communism against democracy, so any leftist movements in Latin America were met with resistance. In 1954, Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown by an American backed coup because he had started implementing socialist policies, such as land reforms. Land reforms would have taken land from companies like United, and given them back to the Guatemalan people.\textsuperscript{17} Suppressing any leftist regimes served to protect American interests both in the political and business worlds.

The U.S. would be unable to stop the Castro government from forming in Cuba in 1959, who would seek support from the Soviets in order to keep the U.S. from further interference. The Soviets would supply the Cubans with missiles in 1962, heightening American fears of communism coming to the Americas.\textsuperscript{18} The events that took place in Cuba led American policy makers to believe that more action was needed in the region if they were going to defeat the Soviets and stop the spread of communism.

Honduras also suffered at the hands of a coup in the 1960s. In 1963, General Osvaldo López Arellano overthrew President Ramon Moralles, against the wishes of the U.S. ambassador and other political figures. In response, the U.S. cut off all aid to the country, except for

\textsuperscript{18} Don Munton & David Welch, \textit{The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History} (New York, 2012).
humanitarian aid going to the people. Americans living in the country at the time were happy with the coup, fearing that the previous regime was headed towards communism. In an interview with the Chicago Tribune, one American citizen living in San Pedro Sula at the time said, “Instead of censuring the present regime, state should have sent representatives down here to pin medals on all of them and take lessons on how to handle communism, then go back home and do likewise.” This was a view that was common throughout the U.S. during the Cold War, any leftist policies were considered to be communist, and therefore they were inherently evil.

As political interests in Honduras were rising due to Cold War fears, the political influence of the banana companies began to drop. In 1975, Honduran president General Osvaldo López Arellano, was kicked out of office. President Arellano was overthrown after it was discovered that he had received $1.5 million from Standard Fruit in order to save the company $7.5 million in export taxes every year, money that could’ve gone to the Honduran government. Arellano’s successor, Juan Alberto Melgar Castro, tried to align himself with the banana companies like others had in the past, but they no longer held the influence they once did and he was quickly overthrown as well in 1978. A new, more dangerous market was beginning to take over in Honduras and the rest of Central America, and it was cocaine.

The new president of Honduras was General Policarpo Paz Garcia, and his financier was Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros, a drug kingpin from México. Matta was already well known for his trafficking of cocaine, after already having been arrested at Dulles Airport in 1970 for importing fifty-four pounds of cocaine. By getting Paz Garcia the presidency, Matta cemented

his position in Honduras. The presidency of Policarpo Paz Garcia would see Honduras rise to become one of the major transshipment points for cocaine in the world, which was helped by Matta and his connections in the Honduran military. Soon even the CIA would be using Matta’s airline for transportation of drugs and supplies in and out of the country.\(^{22}\)

When Nicaragua overthrew the Somoza dictatorship and implemented the Sandinista government in 1979, U.S. interests in Honduras peaked. The Sandinista government began implementing leftist policies similar to leaders like Fidel Castro, and Americans feared Nicaragua would become the next Cuba. With the governments of the neighboring countries of Guatemala and El Salvador also in chaos, Honduras served to keep a close eye on American interests in those nations as well. The military held the majority of power in the country, but unlike other countries in the region at this time, it was not repressive, nor was it controlled by the wealthy elites. The military still allowed for organized political dissent, trade unions, peasant organizations, and a free press. Compared to other governments in the region, Honduras was a stable operating base.\(^{23}\)

Jack Binns was an ambassador of the United States in Honduras in 1980 and 1981, which was during the last year of President Carter’s administration and the first year of President Reagan’s. Binns was able to experience both Carter and Reagan’s policies toward Honduras, and Latin America. According to Binns, Carter worked to improve Honduras as a nation by beginning their transition back to a democracy, spending to improve major business sectors, and trying to lessen corruption in the government.\(^{24}\) Carter’s plan was to build Honduras up as a

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 57.  
peaceful democracy, to show the neighboring Nicaraguans that transitions could be made non violently.

Binns believes that the transition between the Carter and Reagan administrations created miscommunications and contradictions within the Latin American Ambassadors. Reagan was firmly anti-communist, and fought hard to keep any leftist movements in Latin America from gaining power. Binns is critical of Reagan’s policies in Honduras because he would supply the Hondurans with money they were only able to spend on their defense budget, essentially undoing all the work the Carter administration had tried to put in place.\footnote{Ibid., 82.} Carter didn’t see Nicaragua as much of a threat compared to Reagan, but he still allowed Nicaraguan rebel forces to stay on the border of Honduras and Nicaragua. Nicaraguans felt that the U.S. was still siding with the Hondurans. These rebels would go into the Nicaragua and rape and kill innocent Nicaraguan citizens and because the U.S. allowed them to stay, instead of getting weapons from the U.S., Nicaragua bought them from the Soviets.\footnote{Kenneth Coleman & George Herring, \textit{The Central American Crisis: Sources of conflict and the Failure of U.S. policy} (Wilmington, 1985), 165.} As Nicaragua was drawing more attention from America, so too did Honduras. From 1979-1981 economic aid from the U.S. to Honduras tripled, making it the highest recipient of U.S. aid in the region. Clearly the Americans believed that Honduras was the key to solving their issues in Nicaragua, whether it would be through peaceful or more aggressive means was yet to be seen.

In December of 1981, Secretary of State Haig said to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States, “the United States is prepared to join others in doing whatever is prudent and necessary to prevent any country in Central America from becoming a platform for terror and war.” Only a few days earlier President Reagan had authorized the CIA to spend
$19 million to help prepare for war, in contradiction to what his Secretary of State says the goal is. In an article written by Alfonso Chardy for the Miami Herald, Chardy claims that the Honduran leaders were not happy with the presence of anti-Sandinista rebels, and demanded more military and economic aid to the country. The United States fed off Honduran fears and American dependency, and helped to build the Honduran Armed forces with the help of the Israelis who trained their Air Force to be the best in the region. This allowed the Hondurans to feel less threatened by the Nicaraguan forces, who had the larger and superior Army, but lacked a sufficient Air Force to conduct an invasion.

By the time Reagan was in office, the conflict had only escalated. The U.S. Congress was divided on U.S. policy, and in December 1982 they passed a bill that prohibited the use of U.S. funds to overthrow the Sandinista government, which was signed into law by Reagan. In search of other ways to fund the rebels, the CIA bought drugs from the rebels, who were backed by South American cartels, in exchange for weapons and ammunitions to prepare for an attack on Nicaragua. Most of these deals were being made on Honduran airstrips, and with cooperation from Honduran military officials. Americans made it clear that they would continue to funnel drugs into the country when they decided to shut down the DEA office in Tegucigalpa just two years after it was opened. They claimed it was too expensive to keep the office open, but the CIA office in the country was in the process of growing at the same time. This only fueled the drug

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27 Ibid., 168.
31 Peter Dale Scott, Cocaine Politics (Berkeley, 1998), 57.
trade that had arisen during the early years of the banana trade. These trades were done with the help of Honduran military officers, and they would continue to be closely tied to drug trafficking in Honduras.

The CIA also helped to train the infamous Battalion 3-16 in Honduras, they are known throughout the country for carrying out political assassinations, and also kidnapping and torturing Honduran subversives. These soldiers were brought to the U.S. to learn “anti-guerilla tactics” to take home and apply to the Honduran people. They also received additional training from Argentinian intelligence\(^\text{32}\) once they got back to Honduras.\(^\text{33}\) Honduras wasn’t the first or only place to receive this training, the U.S. became famous for The School of the Americas (SOA), soldiers across Central and South America were trained by the Americans to work as a repressive force to limit the spread of communism. According to former soldiers of the Battalion, the Americans would teach them about surveillance and interrogation methods, while the Argentines showed them different ways to torture prisoners in order to get answers. Battalion 3-16 was used by the Honduran government as a repressive force to help quell political dissent, or eliminate opposition. They were one of the driving forces in eliminating any leftist movements in the country, much to the joy of the U.S. According to historian Lesley Gill, Battalion 3-16 committed the majority of the 184 disappearances and executions attributed to the military.\(^\text{34}\)

Military officers who graduated from the SOA were often promoted to high positions within the armed forces due to their alliance with the U.S., one graduate, Colonel Juan Arias,

\(^{32}\) Argentina had just finished a civil war in which thousands of citizens were kidnapped and killed by the Army.


\(^{34}\) Lesley Gill, The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas (Durham, 2004), 83.
believed he was next in line to be commander-in-chief until he spoke with the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras. According to Arias, the ambassador asked what he would do in regards to Nicaragua if he was in charge, he responded by saying he wouldn’t allow for Nicaraguan rebels to reside in Honduras as it was against the Constitution. Arias believed that Central American nations shouldn’t be fighting with each other because they are already poor and weak states, and that fighting will only worsen the state of each nation. The colonel would no longer be on track to be commander-in-chief and was eventually forced into retirement.

If Colonel Arias’ story is to be believed, it shows that not only did the U.S. encourage Honduras to take action against Nicaragua, but they had the power to facilitate it, by putting in leaders they knew would carry out their objectives. This created a political environment where there was no discourse allowed to happen, anybody who tried to speak up against those in power would be taken care of. Without the ability to discuss or disagree with the politics of the nations, democracy began to crumble in Honduras. The United States helped to create this environment in their quest to eradicate communism, and the corruption within the Honduran government carried it out.

The Cold War, especially the 1980s, were an incredibly violent and destructive time in Central America, it is estimated that there were at least 200,000 killings or disappearances from 1979-1991. 40,000 of those occurred in Nicaragua, and 75,000 in both Guatemala and El Salvador. Honduras was significantly less affected than their neighboring countries, with estimated 10,000 killed. According to historian Walter LaFeber, “the years from 1979 to 1991 turned out to be the bloodiest, most violent, and most destructive era in Central America’s post-

\[35\] *Ibid.*, 89.
1820 history.” Although Hondurans still suffered under repressive governments, their governments close ties to the U.S. kept them from becoming a left-wing government, and being seen as a threat by the U.S. as the other countries were. Because of early dependence on American business, Hondurans aligned themselves with the U.S., which is why the U.S. chose to operate out of Honduras during the Cold War.

Reagan’s administration would come under scrutiny for their actions in Central America and the Middle East, including Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. Lt. Col. North served on the National Security council and was involved what came to be known as the Iran Contra affair. The U.S. sent missiles to Iran while there was a trade embargo against it, and used the money they received to supply the Contras with weapons. In 1987, U.S. Senator John Kerry launched an investigation in congress to exam incidents from the contra-drug scandal. And on July 28, 1988 two DEA agents said that Lt. Col. North wanted to take $1.5 million from cartels in Medellin to give to the Contras in order to supply them with weapons. The Kerry Committee determined that, “senior U.S. policy makers were not immune to the idea that drug money was a perfect solution to the Contra’s funding problems.” The investigation shows how U.S. officials were not concerned with how this affected Honduras, as long as they could rid of the leftist Sandinista government. This was already proven to be true in Guatemala with the CIA backed coup against President Arbenz. Cold War fears incited this thinking among Americans, policy makers were determined to defeat anything that resembled communism.

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After news of the Iran Contra Affair broke, American support for Cold War politics in Latin America dropped significantly. The U.S. was forced to back out of the region. Around the same time, gang violence among immigrant populations in the U.S. was rising throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Two rival Latino gangs would form in Los Angeles, MS-13 and the 18th Street gang. These gangs grew from refugee populations that were leaving Central America due to violence, especially El Salvador and grew to include members across all of Latin America. These gangs were incredibly violent, and caused problems for American law enforcement.

Instead of solving the problem within their own borders, the U.S. could deport these criminals back to their home countries because many were undocumented. The U.S. was sending criminal aliens to the receiving countries without informing them that they were murders and gangsters. They were only informing the government of their most recent charge, which was often an immigration violation. This created a new population of young men who came back to Honduras and other Central American countries with no job opportunities and most of their lives they were involved in gangs, and a government ill prepared to receive them. As more and more of these criminal aliens began arriving in Central America, and reestablishing themselves as gang members. Recruitment was easy due to the lack of opportunities for young men, and so began the rise of gangs in Honduras and Central America. Without any major interests to protect like there had been in the past, the U.S. was happy to keep sending dangerous criminals back to a country that already struggled with violence, as long as it meant they were out of the U.S. For them, the ends justified the means because it was no longer their problem.

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40 Tom Diaz, No Boundaries (Ann Arbor, 2009), 164.
The gangs in Honduras began their ascent to power when Honduras became a hub for drug trafficking. Cocaine used to go from Colombia directly to the United States through the port of Miami, the U.S. fought hard to shut down the drug trade in Miami during the 1970s, and they were successful in shutting down Miami, but cartels found other ways to get drugs into the country. The American drug market provided the cartels with all the money they wanted, and they couldn’t let the closing of Miami stop them from getting their drugs to the U.S. The cartels decided they would now bring their drugs through the border between Mexico and the United States. This meant that the drugs had to travel through Central America first before they could get to Mexico and later the U.S., cartels began working with local gangs in Central American countries to help them get the drugs to the United States. Together the cartels and gangs consolidated power together and grew because people knew if they worked for the gangs they would make money, even if it was an incredibly dangerous business. According to historian Ana-Costantina Kolb, “It is the prevalence of human rights violation, the corruption within the political and security system, and the impunity with which crimes are committed that ultimately create an ideal breeding ground for maximizing the influence of organized crime.” These three factors laid out by Kolb are prominent throughout Honduran history, it wasn’t until the mass deportation of criminals, that the gangs took control.

Although gangs would enjoy relative freedoms during their early years, it would not be until the coup d’état of President Manuel Zelaya that they would thrive in the world outlined by Kolb. Zelaya was elected in 2006 and was seen as a very traditional candidate when he came in. While in office he began to work with some left-wing governments in Latin America, including

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Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who was strongly anti-American. Zelaya began changing his policies, he worked to improve social conditions for the people of Honduras. He raised the federal minimum wage, provided public schools with free lunches, added to the pension funds, and established additional scholarships for students. None of these policy changes garnered Zelaya support from the wealthy elites, or influential military leaders because they only benefitted the poorer population. Zelaya’s goal of changing the 1982 constitution is what spurred his political opponents to want to force him out of office. His opponents claimed that Zelaya was trying to change the constitution to allow for consecutive terms, so he would be able to hold onto power, but changing presidential term limits wasn’t even on the ballot for the assembly. Nevertheless, the Honduran Supreme Court still voted to oust the President, and in the middle of the night, army officers came to Zelaya’s bedroom and escorted him onto a plane heading for Costa Rica. Zelaya was the type of president the Hondurans always tried to avoid, they tried to find candidates who would work closely with the Americans and avoid any leftist movements, as those were quickly thwarted and usually left a trail of violence behind. Other neighboring countries in countries like Guatemala and El Salvador had experienced the ways in which a popular leader who provided to nation with hope, could quickly turn into a repressive regime with little to no care about the everyday citizens, and now Honduras was on the same path.

The United States was aware of everything that was happening in regards to the coup in Honduras, but failed to address the situation seriously. The day after the coup President Obama was asked about the situation and said, “We believe that the coup was not legal and that President Zelaya remains the president of Honduras, the democratically elected president”

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Although Obama called it a coup, and claimed it was illegal, the State Department never formally recognized it as a coup and continued to send economic aid. The Secretary of State during the Obama administration was Hillary Clinton, she was in charge of foreign relations for the U.S. during the coup. She spoke about the situation in an interview when she was running for president in 2016. She said, “the national Legislature in Honduras and the national judiciary actually followed the law in removing President Zelaya” and she went on to say, “Now, I didn’t like the way it looked or the way they did it, but they had a very strong argument that they had followed the Constitution and the legal precedence.” It was clear enough for the United Nations and the majority of countries to declare this event a coup, and ask for the reinstatement of Zelaya as President. But Clinton claims that she chose not to declare it a coup because the U.S. would have to cut off all economic aid to Honduras until the situation was cleared, and that would negatively affect the people because that meant cutting humanitarian aid as well.

Instead they never attempted to allow Zelaya back into the country and focused on creating a new election. After Roberto Micheletti was named interim president, the U.S. began asking neighboring nations to accept the results of the election and demanding that they stop calling for the reinstatement of the former president. This effectively legitimized Honduras’ post-coup government around the world.

In allowing Zelaya to be exiled from his own country the United States showed Honduras that they were only interested in their democracy when it benefitted them. The coup transformed the country and brought back a repressive regime that reflected those of Honduras’ Cold War

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neighbors. Death squads similar to Battalion 3-16 began to resurface as they had during the Cold War, they worked to suppress any support for Zelaya, or any political dissidence. In the following years Honduras became more violent, and less democratic. The country was in crisis. In a Human Rights Watch World Report, it is said that the military took control of all opposition media outlets in the days after the coup, temporarily shutting down their transmissions.45 Journalists would continue to be a target of repression from Honduras’ post-coup government.

The government was controlled by those who overthrew Zelaya, and in March 2010 Clinton went to meet with the new President of Honduras, Porfirio Lobo. Lobo’s election was boycotted by many who still called for the return of Zelaya, yet Clinton still recognized the new government for making progress through the elections and encourage nations to normalize relations with Honduras once again. Many nations, including some in Latin America still refused to recognize the newly established government, but the U.S. had enough influence in the country that they were still able to support its continuation.46 Less than a year had passed since President Obama claimed to support the return of Manuel Zelaya, and now the U.S. government was supporting the people who illegally took him out of power. Secretary Clinton was more worried about dealing with the problem as quickly as possible rather than doing what was right, she even said in her book *Hard Choices*, “we strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held… which would render the question of Zelaya moot.”47 The new Honduran government used the United States fear of radical leftist governments from the Cold War to gain support for their cause, but in turn they would lose the support of the

people of Honduras. This would lead to an increase of violent suppression in order to maintain control of the country.

After the ousting of Zelaya, violence in Honduras skyrocketed stemming from protests and the police response. In the three years following the coup, at least 20 journalists had been killed, people were no longer allowed to speak out against the government. Democracy was crumbling in Honduras, people stayed quiet in their objections to the government out of fear of being beaten or killed. Attacks were not limited to journalists either, many peasants living in the Northern Coast had been protesting the new government and over 60 people had been killed because of protests from 2009-2012. In 2011 President Lobo established a truth commission to investigate Human Rights Violation before and after the coup, and it issued a report of 20 cases of excessive force and killings by security forces across the country. Although this appeared to be a step in the right direction for the country, it did little to change the situation in Honduras. Out of the 20 cases brought up, only one police officer was charged with illegal arrest and torture of a protester in San Pedro Sula.\(^4\) The post-coup government in Honduras controlled every branch of the government and the military, they were able to operate without any threat of impunity, and the people of Honduras were unable to make progress because all their efforts were thwarted.

One of the most famous activists to come from Honduras was Berta Cáceres, she was an indigenous woman who fought for human and environmental rights in Honduras. She was very outspoken about Clinton’s role in Honduras after the coup, and not bringing Zelaya back after his exile saying, “There were going to be elections. And the international community—officials, the

government, the grand majority—accepted this, even though we warned this was going to be very dangerous and that it would permit a barbarity, not only in Honduras but in the rest of the continent. And we’ve been witnesses to this.\textsuperscript{49} She understood that by allowing the new government to take form, the U.S. was partially responsible for the direction Honduras was heading in because they were the only country capable of bringing Zelaya back due to their long history of influencing Honduran politics.

In 2015, Berta won the Goldman environmental prize for her efforts in Honduras to fight infrastructure projects that would displace the indigenous communities of their land. One of the projects she fought against was a plan to build a hydraulic dam on the Gualcarque River\textsuperscript{50}, a sacred river for the Lenca people who were living in the region. The projects were created without the consultation of the indigenous communities they were displacing, and protests were met with extreme violence as seen by the Human Rights Watch report. Cáceres received many death threats for her work, and in 2016 she was under protection from the state because of her protesting of the dam when she was shot and killed in her home. Twelve days later one of her colleagues was also killed for his opposition to the dam.\textsuperscript{51} Three of the eight people arrested in connection to her murder either used to be in the military, or were still active. It is believed that the murder was planned by Honduran authorities. A former member of the Honduran special forces, Rodrigo Cruz, claimed that he saw Cáceres’ name on a hit list along with other prominent activists in the country. Cruz worked in the Fusina, a new military unit supposedly created to combat drug-trafficking in the nation, these soldiers were trained by U.S. marines along with FBI

\textsuperscript{50} The Gualcarque River runs North to South, and is located about 50 miles west of Tegucigalpa.
agents. The Fusina functioned similarly to Battalion 3-16, they worked under the guise of a special forces military outfit, but worked closely with the government to eliminate political resistance. Cruz and others in his outfit, including the unit commander, chose to desert instead of follow through on the orders. Cruz said in an interview with the Guardian, “If I went home, they’d kill me. Ten of my former colleagues are missing. I’m 100% certain that Berta Cáceres was killed by the army." Soldiers carried out these killings, not because they believed it was right, but out of fear for their own lives. The government of Honduras was not only holding the nation hostage, they were also forcing soldiers to carry out killings at the threat of death.

The government of Honduras continued to blame the gangs for the violence in the country while completely ignoring the atrocities they have committed. Under the presidency of Ricardo Maduro, Honduras began a hard anti-gang policy starting in 2004. Many young men were rounded up and charged for gang affiliation, which could mean as little as having a tattoo used by either gang, and sent to jail. Meanwhile, real crimes like rape and murder were still going unsolved, at a rate of over 90 percent. Guillermo López, the former chief criminal justice in San Pedro Sula, was asked about the rise in incarceration and said that the situation was ironic because any real gang members with power can just bribe the judge to drop the case, so the majority of people being arrested are either low-level, or they left the gangs but still had the tattoos. The Honduran government has yet to bring a criminal case against any of the gang’s leaders, who are well known throughout the country. López goes on to say that the police are committing a lot of crimes themselves, but the ones they aren’t committing, they don’t have the

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ability to solve. With minimal resources, there is little Honduras can do to solve all the crimes being committed, especially when there is rampant corruption in all positions of power.

After the rise in arrests, prisons were being overrun by gang members, which eventually lead to them paying off guards and taking control of the prisons. The United States no longer was as interested in the affairs in Honduras, so as long as the government appeared to be democratic in nature, they would not get involved. Conditions only continued to worsen, by 2010 the homicide rate had reached 77.5 per 100,000 people, which had more than doubled in the last decade, and out of every 100,000 people in the country, 500 were members of a gang. Once in prison gang members lived comfortably, HBO Vice sent a reporter to see prison conditions for gang members. In a prison in San Pedro Sula inmates could do what they wanted, some had started small businesses which formed a market in the middle of the prison, and leaders in the gangs were still able to control operations from the inside. Assistant prison director Carlos Polanco said in an interview, “the prisoners rule,” and that the guards “only handle external security.”

Another prison in Danli, Honduras, has earned the reputation as being one of the most dangerous prisons in the world. Paul Connolly, a British journalist, spent two days in the prison to experience and film what life was like in these prisons. The Danli prison was only meant to hold 280 prisoners, but when Connolly went there were over 700 people incarcerated. Inside the prison walls the guards had no control, some prisoners walked around carrying batons, these

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54 *Crackdown in Honduras*, directed by Shane Smith (HBO Vice, 2017), Television.
were the coordinators, and they were in charge of keeping control among the prison population. There was a very clear hierarchy among the prisoners. One man named Neri was in charge of all the operations within the prisons, he assigned everyone to their coordinator positions and would charge rent for those who setup business’ inside the prisons. Neri would use the rent to buy bleach and cleaning supplies for the inmates because there were none provided by the prison itself due to lack of funding. Connolly spoke with the prison’s director, Lt. Nelson Ponce, who says that he feels ignored by the government, his men don’t have enough guns or ammunition to properly arm themselves in case there was an uprising, and the fences outside the prison have holes and are falling apart.\footnote{Paul Connolly, \textit{Inside the World’s Toughest Prisons}, directed by Nick Norman-Butler (ABC, 2016), Television.} Without proper funding there is little separating the dangerous criminals inside from the cities outside, and without sufficient security, criminals get to do what they want in the prisons. Guards have to give concessions to prisoners otherwise an already volatile environment would turn into a constant fight, one which the prisoners might win.

Honduras has begun to take a step in the right direction by creating new maximum security prisons to hold the most dangerous criminals so that their influence can be truly cut off from the gangs.\footnote{Crackdown in Honduras, Shane Smith (HBO Vice, 2017), Television.} In older prisons all the inmates could be visited by family, and receive weapons, phones, or drugs so they could run operations still. The new prisons are designed to cutoff all connections to their old lives. While the prisons are an improvement, they won’t change the attitude of gangsters towards prison, they will continue going about their business.

Since the gangs in Central America, like MS-13 and the 18\textsuperscript{th} Street gang, had become transnational after all the deportation of members back to their birth nations, cartels knew they could use them to get drugs from South America to the United States. American demand for
drugs fueled the cocaine manufacturing in South America, which was now being transported by gangs in Central America. In 2012, an estimated 90 percent of cocaine coming to the U.S. traveled through Central America first. The drug trade was generating incredible profits for the gangs, which only drew more members who were attracted to the gangster lifestyle. Gang members not only had enough money to feed themselves, they still had more leftover to pay for tattoos or motorcycles. The gangs also serve as surrogate families for young members, they are raised by older leaders and taught how to be a dedicated member. Junior members often serve as lookouts, or commit petty robbery to earn their stripes. They quickly move into more violent crime, one former member of MS-13, Andreas, says that by the time he was twelve years old he had killed around fifteen people. When asked if he felt guilty about any of the killings Andreas said that one in particular still bothered him, his victim was a middle-aged woman who was working as a low level drug-dealer for the gang. They had found out she was cutting her drugs with talcum powder in order to maximize her profits, so he was sent to kill her. Andreas said the lady had always been very nice to him, but he shot her multiple times in the back as her six children watched because that is what his gang asked of him.

Andreas was recruited into the gang by his cousin, he said he was given a gun, women, and drugs. The gang brainwashes kids by getting them addicted to drugs and normalizing them to violence, to the point where they no longer value life. Andreas said that after he killed someone for the first time his friends threw him a party to celebrate the occasion. But even he felt that the gangs were getting worse, he left the gang at age 23 after being deported back to Honduras. He saw the new recruits as being crazier than he was, after taking part in public massacres killing

dozens of people, Andreas finally bought his freedom for $9,000. The story of Andreas epitomizes the experience of many young men in Honduras, with little options for their future and growing up surrounded by poverty and violence becoming a gang member is a viable choice for them. Many have older brothers or family members who are in the gang and invite them to join their brotherhood, they are taken in and treated like family.

Gang violence often overflows into poor Honduran communities, and innocent citizens are often caught in the crossfire of the war between gangs and the state. Many of these victims were children, there are cases where a gang will occupy a school and use it as an operating base. Teachers and school officials had to pay taxes to the gangs everyday if they wanted to remain at the school. Many of the students, both girls and boys, work for the gangs already, and some purposefully fail grades in order to stay in the school longer. Boys run drugs, while girls earn money as prostitutes, starting as young as 14 years old. Eventually police forces came and took control of a school in Tegucigalpa which was controlled by gangs, but children and families are still not free of their influence. Parents often choose to send their kids to the U.S. so they don’t have live in these conditions, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 18,244 unaccompanied Honduran children were apprehended in 2014, a dramatic rise from the year before. Ever since 2009, after the coup, child immigration to the United States has been quickly rising, going from under three thousand children in 2009, to over eighteen thousand in 2014.62

Parents risk sending their kids on a dangerous journey because they know that life in Honduras is no safer, this is their way of keeping them away from the gangs and out of trouble.

Although parents are sending their kids away at record rates, violence in Honduras has slowly but consistently fallen since 2012, a promising sign of progress. The presidential election of 2013 would be an important determinant in the future of the country. The two candidates were Juan Orlando Hernández, a conservative for the National party, and Xiomara Castro, the wife of ousted president Manuel Zelaya, who ran for the newly formed Libre party. The most important issue for their campaign was national security, and Hernández promised to strengthen military police presence in the streets. Castro wanted to establish new community police forces who would work with local communities, and focus military intervention or the border, away from the communities. Castro believed that creating repressive groups only furthered the violence, something Hondurans could relate to through personal experiences. Castro had overwhelming support from the working class people of Honduras, but there were concerns about whether the election would be real. The week of the election, three leading members of the Libre party were murdered, which was a sign to the people that the elections would most likely be rigged. After initial voting it appeared that Orlando would be elected with 36.8% of the vote, but each party received copies of their votes and recounted. It was discovered that the National party had an over count of 82,301, and the Libre party was undercounted by 55,720 votes. Even after all the discrepancies with the election, Hernández was still inaugurated in 2014.

Despite the circumstances of his election, Hernández has followed through on his campaign promises. With the help of U.S. aid, he established the new maximum security prisons,

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and created the Fusina in order to fight drug trafficking and gang violence. The Fusina has also served as another death squad as well, as in the case of Berta Caceres. This can be attributed to the fact that Hernández was on an important congressional committee in the coup against Manuel Zelaya. He and the National party are proponents of repressive forces in Honduras as means to protect their power by eliminating the competition. Hernández and the Honduran government continue to receive U.S. aid even though it is clear he was involved in a coup President Obama recognized as illegal, and was elected under suspicious circumstances. After Hernández’s victory, then Secretary of State, John Kerry, extended his “warm congratulations” and said the he “looks forward to deepening our cooperation.” Hernández went on to stack the court in order to get the majority to declare the articles of the constitution not allowing reelection as unconstitutional. The United States’ support of Honduras’ post-coup government shows that Cold War attitudes have not completely disappeared. Americans will continue to back conservative governments over any leftist movements, even at the expense the people of the country.

For much of its history, Honduran interests have been trumped by U.S. interests. First, the banana enterprises came in and demanded land concessions at the expense of indigenous populations. Since the Americans paid those who cooperated with them, and the business they brought into the country helped the struggling economy, they were able to find officials willing to give them concessions. The banana industry also helped to establish Honduras as a midway

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64 Crackdown in Honduras, Shane Smith (HBO Vice, 2017), Television.
point for South American drugs on their way to the U.S., with the help of the mafia in New Orleans and easily corrupted Honduran military officials.

American fears over communism during the Cold War would lead the U.S. to halt Honduran economic progress, and train repressive military forces to eliminate any leftist movements. The Cold War era destroyed governments and countries across Latin America, but due to a subversion to U.S. interests, Honduras was able to escape relatively unscathed. It wasn’t until the presidency of Manuel Zelaya that Honduras started going to the left in its government. The fact that the U.S. never intervened in order to bring Zelaya back to his rightful position, and its support of the illegal government afterwards shows that they had no interests in the people of Honduras, but only in having governments that were loyal to the U.S. It was at this time that the presence of gangs became prominent, they formed due to the United States’ unwillingness to solve their gang problems within their own borders. Instead they sent gang members to countries ill prepared to receive them. They were able to quickly grow due to the weak governments of Central America and the widespread corruption among police and other security forces.

Honduran corruption has allowed for U.S. policy in the country to be so effective. It has been clear since the banana enterprises, and has continued to thrive in the modern day as well, and it is through the corruption that gangs are able to increase their power and influence. They are able to pay off officials at almost any level to get what they want, and if they don’t, they will respond with violence. Gangs thrived in countries with weak governments, and the epitome of this in Honduras was after the coup ‘d’état to overthrow Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

It is now on the Honduran people to restore their democracy. On November 26, 2017, Hondurans voted for their next president and two weeks later there is still no winner. The two candidates are the incumbent, Juan Orlando Hernández, of the National party, and Salvador
Nasralla of the Libre party. The morning after voting took place, the election tribunal declared Nasralla was comfortably in the lead with half the votes counted, but gave no updates for thirty-six hours. When votes started coming back in, Hernández quickly starting closing the gap. Currently Nasralla trails Hernández by 1.6% with 95% of votes in, but Nasralla claims the National party is committing voter fraud. Nasralla has encouraged his supporters to take to the streets and protest the injustice, which has lead to clashes between police forces and citizens. President Hernández implemented a 6pm-6am curfew to limit violence, but now the police have begun refusing to enforce the curfew. Nasralla has gone on television encouraging the army to follow in the footsteps of the police and defy the president.

While all this is happening in the country, on November 28th Honduras received certification from the U.S. State Department saying that they were fighting corruption and supporting human rights. This certification allowed for millions of dollars to be sent as aid to Honduras. The events surrounding the elections perfectly encapsulate the relationship between the U.S. and Honduras. While the people of Honduras are fighting for democracy in the street, the United States continues to support leaders who are corrupt and repressive.

No matter who wins the election, it will be the Honduran state that comes out damaged. Results will be highly contested and the strength of the government will be weak due to a lack of support from the populous. Until Honduras is able to come together as a unified state, it will not be able to properly fight that gangs that are also threaten to tear the country apart. It is time the

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U.S. stopped only supporting leaders who would push their agendas, and instead support the
democratic leader, who will serve to benefit the people of the country.
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