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The Evolution of U.S.-Backed Death Squads in Honduras The Pathology of U.S. Foreign Policy

By TJ Coles, CounterPunch, December 20, 2020

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/back-to-the-past-in-honduras>

Rights Action recommends this article (by T.J. Coles, Counterpunch, December 20, 2020) as a reminder and refresher about the enormity of wealth, power and violence the Honduran people are resisting and fighting to transform, and about the underlying role, responsibility and complicity of the U.S. and allies in the “international community”.

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Military-backed regime of drug-trafficking Honduran regime in power, a “democratic allie” of the U.S., Canada and the “international community”

The Evolution of U.S.-Backed Death Squads in Honduras The Pathology of U.S. Foreign Policy

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<https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/12/20/the-evolution-of-u-s-backed-death-squads-in-honduras/>

U.S. intelligence agencies and corporations have pushed back against the so-called [Pink Tide](#), the coming to power of socialistic governments in Central and South America. Examples include: the [slow-burning attempt](#) to overthrow Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro; the [initially successful](#) soft coup in Bolivia against President Evo Morales; and the [constitutional crises](#) that removed Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

In 2009, the Obama administration (2009-17) [backed a coup](#) in Honduras against President Manuel Zelaya. Since then, Honduras has endured a decline in its living standards and democratic institutions. The return of 1980s-style death squads operating against working people in the interests of U.S. corporations has contributed to the [refugee-migrant flow](#) to the United States and to the rise of racist politics.

EMPIRES: FROM THE SPANISH TO THE AMERICAN

Honduras (pop. 9.5 million) is surrounded by Guatemala and Belize in the north, El Salvador in the west, and Nicaragua in the south. It has a small western coast on the Pacific Ocean and an extensive coastline on the Caribbean Sea in the Atlantic. Nine out of 10 Hondurans are Indo-European (mestizo). GDP is <\$25bn and [over 60 percent](#) of the people live in poverty: one in five in extreme poverty.

Honduras gained independence from Spain in 1821, before being annexed to the Mexican Empire. Hondurans have endured some 300 rebellions, civil wars, and/or changes of government; more than half of which occurred in the 20th century. Writing in 1998, the Clinton White House [acknowledged](#) that Honduras’s

“agriculturally based economy came to be dominated by U.S. companies that established vast banana plantations along the north coast.”

The significant U.S. military presence [began in the 1930s](#), with the establishment of an air force and military assistance program. The Clinton White House also [noted](#) that the founder of the National Party, Tiburcio Carías Andino (1876-1969), had “ties to dictators in neighboring countries and to U.S. banana companies [which] helped him maintain power until 1948.”

The C.I.A. [notes](#) that dictator Carías’s repression of Liberals would make those Liberals “turn to conspiracy and [provoke] attempts to foment revolution, which would render them much more susceptible to Communist infiltration and control.” The Agency said that in so-called emerging democracies: “The opportunities for Communist penetration of a repressed and conspiratorial organization are much greater than in a freely functioning political party.” So, for certain C.I.A. analysts, “liberal democracy” is a buffer against dictatorships that legitimize genuinely left-wing oppositional groups. The C.I.A. cites the case of Guatemala in which “a strong dictatorship prior to 1944 did not prevent Communist activity which led after the dictator’s fall, to the establishment of a pro-Communist government.”

REDS UNDER THE BED

To understand the thinking behind the U.S.-backed death squads, it is worth looking at some partly-declassified C.I.A. material on early-Cold War planning. The paranoia was such that each plantation laborer was potentially a Soviet asset hiding in the fruit field. These subversives could be ready, at any moment, to strike against U.S. companies and the nascent American Empire.

In line with some strategists’ conditional preferences for “liberal democracies,” Honduras has the façade of voter choice, with two main parties controlled by the military. After the Second World War, U.S. policy exploited Honduras as a giant military base from which left-wing or suspected “communist” movements in neighboring countries could be countered.

In 1954, for instance, Honduras was [used](#) as a base for the C.I.A.’s operation PBSuccess to overthrow Guatemala’s President, Jacobo Árbenz (1913-71).

Writing in '54, the C.I.A. [said](#) that the Liberal Party of Honduras “has the support of the majority of the Honduran voters. Much of its support comes from the lower classes.” The Agency also believed that the banned Communist Party of Honduras planned to infiltrate the Liberals to nudge them further left. But an Agency document [notes](#) that “there may be fewer than 100” militant Communists in Honduras and there were “perhaps another 300 sympathizers.”

The document also notes: “The organization of a Honduran Communist Party has never been conclusively established,” though the C.I.A. thought that the small Revolutionary Democratic Party of Honduras “might have been a front.” The Agency also [believed](#) that Communists were behind the Workers’ Coordinating Committee that led strikes of 40,000 laborers against the U.S.-owned United Fruit and Standard Fruit Companies, which the Agency acknowledges “dominate[d] the economy of the region.” In the same breath, the C.I.A. also says that the Communists “lost control of the workers,” post-strike.

A PROXY AGAINST NICARAGUA

A U.S. military report [states](#) that “[c]onducting joint exercises with the Honduran military has a long history dating back to 1965.” By 1975, U.S. military helicopters operating in Honduras at Catacamas, a village in the east, assisted “logistical support of counterinsurgency operations,” [according](#) to the CIA. These machines aided the Honduran forces in their skirmishes against pro-Castro elements from Nicaragua operating along the Patuca River in the south of Honduras. By the mid-1990s, there were [at least 30](#) helicopters operating in Honduras.

In 1979, the National Sandinista Liberation Front (Sandinistas) came to power in Nicaragua, deposing and later assassinating the U.S.-backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1925-80). For the Reagan administration (1981-89), Honduras was a proxy against the defiant Nicaragua.

The U.S. Army War College wrote at the time: “President Reagan has clearly expressed our national commitment to combating low intensity conflict in developing countries.”

It says that “The responsibility now falls upon the Department of State and the Department of Defense to develop plans and doctrine for meeting this requirement.” The same document [confirms](#) that the U.S. Army Special Operations Forces (SOF), the 18th Airborne Corps, was sent to Honduras. “Mobile

Training Teams (MTT) were dispatched to train Honduran soldiers in small unit tactics, helicopter maintenance and air operations, and to establish the Regional Military Training Center near Trujillo and Puerto Castilla,” both on the eastern coast.

A SOUTHCOM document dates significant U.S. military assistance to Honduras to the 1980s. It [notes](#) the effect of public pressure on U.S. policy, highlighting: “a general lack of appetite among the American public to see U.S. forces committed in the wake of the Vietnam War [which] resulted in strict parameters that limited the scope of military involvement in Central America.”

[According](#) to SOUTHCOM, the Regional Military Training Center was designed “to train friendly countries in basic counterinsurgency tactics.” President Reagan wanted to smash the Sandinistas, but “the executive branch’s hands were tied by the 1984 passage of the Boland Amendment [to the Defense Appropriations Act], banning the use of U.S. military aid to be given to the Contras,” the anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua. As a result, “the strong and sudden focus instead on training, and arguably by proxy, the establishment of [Joint Task Force-Bravo],” an elite military unit assigned a “counter-communist mission.”

The Green Berets trained the contras from bases in Honduras, “accompanying them on missions into Nicaragua.” The North American Congress on Latin America [noted](#) at the time that “Military planes flying out of Honduras are coordinated by a laser navigation system, and contras operating inside Nicaragua are receiving night supply drops from C-130s using the Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System,” first used in Vietnam and operational only to a few personnel.

“The CIA, operating out of Air Force bases in the United States, hires pilots for the hazardous sorties at \$30,000 per mission.” The report notes that troops from El Salvador “were undergoing U.S. training every day of the year, in Honduras, the United States and the new basic training center at La Union,” in the north.

SPECIAL UNITS AND ANTI-COMMUNISTS

The U.S. also launched psychological operations against domestic leftism in Honduras. This involved morphing a special police unit into a military intelligence squad guilty of kidnap, torture, and murder: Battalion 316. Inducing a climate of fear in workers, union leaders, intellectuals, and human rights lawyers is way of

ensuring that progressive ideas like good healthcare, free education, and decent living standards don't take root.

In 1963, the Fuerza de Seguridad Pública (FUSEP, Public Security Force) was [set up](#) as a branch of the military. During the early-'80s, FUSEP commanded the National Directorate of Investigations, regular national police units, and National Special Units, "which provided technical support to the arms interdiction program," [according](#) to the CIA, in which "material from Nicaragua passed through Honduras to guerrillas in El Salvador."

The National Directorate of Investigations ran the secret Honduran Anti-Communist Liberation Army (ELACH, 1980-84), described by the C.I.A. as "a rightist paramilitary organization which conducted operations against Honduran leftists."

The C.I.A. [repeats](#) allegations that "ELACH's operations included surveillance, kidnappings, interrogation under duress, and execution of prisoners who were Honduran revolutionaries." ELACH worked in cooperation with the Special Unit of FUSEP. "The mission of the Unit was essentially ... to combat both domestic and regional subversive movements operating in and through Honduras." The C.I.A. also notes that "this included penetrating various organizations such as the Honduran Communist Party, the Central American Regional Trotskyite Party, and the Popular Revolutionary Forces-Lorenzo Zelaya (FPR-LZ) Marxist terrorist organization."

Gustavo Adolfo Álvarez (1937-89), future head of the Honduran Armed Forces, [told](#) U.S. President Jimmy Carter's Honduras Ambassador, Jack Binns, that their forces would use "extra-legal means" to destroy communists. Binns [wrote](#) in a confidential cable: "I am deeply concerned at increasing evidence of officially sponsored/sanctioned assassinations of political and criminal targets, which clearly indicate [Government of Honduras] repression has built up a head of steam much faster than we had anticipated."

But U.S. doctrine shifted under President Reagan. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas O. Enders, [told](#) Binns not to send such material to the State Department for fear of leakage. Enders himself [said](#) of human rights in Honduras: "the Reagan administration had broader interests."

Under Reagan, John Negroponte replaced Binns at the U.S. Embassy in the capital Tegucigalpa, from where many C.I.A. agents operated. In 1981, secret briefings [informed](#) Negroponte that “[Government of Honduras] security forces have begun to resort to extralegal tactics — disappearances and, apparently, physical eliminations to control a perceived subversive threat.”

Rick Chidster, a junior political officer at the U.S. Embassy was [ordered](#) by superiors in 1982 to remove references to Honduran military abuses from his annual human rights report prepared for Congress.

THE MAKING OF BATTALION-316

In March 1981, Reagan [authorized](#) the expansion of covert operations to “provide all forms of training, equipment, and related assistance to cooperating governments throughout Central America in order counter foreign-sponsored subversion and terrorism.”

Documents obtained by The Baltimore Sun the [reveal](#) that from 1981, the U.S. provided funds for Argentine counterinsurgency experts to train anti-Communists in Honduras; many of whom had, themselves, been trained by the U.S. in earlier years. At a camp in Lepaterique, in western Honduras, Argentine killers under U.S. supervision trained their Honduran counterparts.

Oscar Álvarez, a former Honduran Special Forces officer and diplomat [trained](#) by the U.S., [said](#): “The Argentines came in first, and they taught how to disappear people.” With training and equipment, such as hidden cameras and phone bugging technology, U.S. agents “made them more efficient.” The [U.S.-trained](#) Chief of Staff, Gen. José Bueso Rosa, [says](#): “We were not specialists in intelligence, in gathering information, so the United States offered to help us organize a special unit.”

Between 1982 and 1984, the aforementioned Gen. Álvarez headed the Armed Forces. In 1983, Reagan awarded him the Legion of Merit for “encouraging the success of democratic processes in Honduras.” When C.I.A. Station Chief, Donald Winters, adopted a child, he asked Álvarez to be the godfather.

After WWII, the U.S. Army established, in the Panama Canal Zone, a Latin American Training Center-Ground Division at Fort Amador, later renamed the U.S. Army School of the Americas and moved to Fort Benning, Georgia. Now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, the C.I.A.'s [Phoenix Program](#) in Vietnam and its [MK-ULTRA](#) mind-torture programs influenced the Honduras curriculum at the School.

In 1983, the U.S. military participated in Strategic Military Seminar with the Honduran Armed Forces, at which it was decided that FUSEP would be transformed from a police force into a military intelligence unit. "The purpose of this change," [says](#) the C.I.A., "was to improve coordination and improve control." It also aimed "To make available greater personnel, resources, and to integrate the intel production."

In 1984, the Special Unit was placed under the command of the Military Intelligence Division and renamed the 316th Battalion, at which point "it continued to provide technical support to the arms interdiction program" in neighboring countries.

A C.I.A. officer based in the U.S. Embassy is [known](#) to have visited the Military Industries jail: one of Battalion 316's torture chambers in which victims were bound, beaten, electrocuted, raped, and poisoned.

Battalion torturer, José Barrera, says: "They always asked to be killed ... Torture is worse than death."

Battalion 316 officer, José Valle, [explained](#) surveillance methods: "We would follow a person for four to six days. See their daily routes from the moment they leave the house. What kind of transportation they use. The streets they go on." Men in black ski masks would bundle the victim into a vehicle with dark-tinted windows and no license plates.

Under Lt. Col. Alonso Villeda, the Battalion was [disbanded and replaced](#) in 1987 with a Counterintelligence Division of the Honduran Armed Forces. Led by the Chief of Staff for Intelligence (C-2), it absorbed the Battalion's personnel, units, analysis centers, and functions.

In 1988, Richard Stolz, then-U.S. Deputy Director for Operations, [told](#) the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in secret hearings that C.I.A. officers ran courses and taught psychological torture. “The course consisted of three weeks of classroom instruction followed by two weeks of practical exercises, which included the questioning of actual prisoners by the students.”

Former Ambassador Binns [says](#): “I think it is an example of the pathology of foreign policy.”

In response to the allegations, which he denied, former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Elliott Abrams, [replied](#): “A human rights policy is not supposed to make you feel good.”

Between 1982 and 1993, the U.S. taxpayer gave [half a billion dollars](#) in military “aid” to Honduras. By 1990, 184 people had “disappeared,” [according](#) to President Manuel Zelaya, who in 2008 intimated that he would reopen cases of the disappeared.

THE ZELAYA COUP

After centuries of struggle, Hondurans elected a President who raised living standards through wealth redistribution. Winner of the 2005 Presidential elections, Manuel Zelaya of the Liberal Party’s Movimiento Esperanza Liberal faction increased the minimum wage, provided free education to children, subsidised small farmers, and provided free electricity to the country’s poorest. Zelaya countered media monopoly propaganda by imposing minimum airtime for government broadcasts and allied with America’s regional enemies via the proposed ALBA trading bloc.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) [reported](#) at the time that “analysts” reckoned Zelaya’s move “runs the risk of jeopardizing the traditionally close state of relations with the United States.” The CRS also bemoaned Zelaya delaying the accreditation of the U.S. Ambassador, Hugo Llorens, “to show solidarity with Bolivia in its diplomatic spat with the United States in which Bolivia expelled the U.S. Ambassador.”

Because Zeyala did not have enough Congressional representatives to agree to his plan, he attempted to expand democracy by holding a referendum on

constitutional changes. Both the lower and Supreme Courts agreed to the opposition parties blocking the referendum. In defiance of the courts, Zelaya ordered the military to help with election logistics, an order refused by the head of the Armed Forces, Gen. Romeo Vásquez, who later claimed that Zelaya had dismissed him, which Zelaya [denies](#).

Using pro-Zelaya demonstrations as a pretext for taking to the streets, the military mobilized and, in June 2009, the Supreme Court authorized Zelaya's capture, after which he was exiled to Costa Rica.

In the book *Hard Choices*, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's ghostwriters, with her approval, refer to Latin America as the U.S.'s "backyard" and to Zelaya as "a throwback to the caricature of a Central American strongman, with his white cowboy hat, dark black mustache, and fondness for Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro" (p. 222).

The publishers [omitted](#) from the paperback edition Clinton's role in the coup: "We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras" (plus the usual boilerplate about democracy promotion.)

Decree PCM-M-030-2009 ordered the election be held during a state of emergency. The peaceful, pro-Zelaya groups, La Resistencia and Frente Hondureña de Resistencia Popular, were targeted under Anti-Terror Laws. The right-wing Porfirio Lobo was elected with over 50 percent of the vote in a fake 60 percent turnout (later revised to 49 percent).

U.S. President Obama [described](#) this as "a restoration of democratic practices and a commitment to reconciliation that gives us great hope." Hope and change for Honduras came in the form of economic changes benefitting U.S. corporations.

The U.S. State Department [notes](#): "Many of the approximately 200 U.S. companies that operate in Honduras take advantage of protections available in the Central American and Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement."

Note the inadvertent acknowledgement that "free trade" is actually protection for U.S. corporations.

The State Department also notes: “The Honduran government is generally open to foreign investment. Low labor costs, proximity to the U.S. market, and the large Caribbean port of Puerto Cortes make Honduras attractive to investors.”

Four years into Zelaya’s overthrow, unemployment jumped from 35.5 percent to 56.4 percent.

In 2014, Honduras signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund for a \$189m loan. The Center for Economic and Policy Research [states](#): “Honduran authorities agreed to implement fiscal consolidation... including privatizations, pension reforms and public sector layoffs.” The Congressional Research Service [states](#): “President Juan Orlando Hernández of the conservative National Party was inaugurated to a second four-year term in January 2018. He lacks legitimacy among many Hondurans, however, due to allegations that his 2017 reelection was unconstitutional and marred by fraud.”

RETURN OF THE DEATH SQUADS

Since the coup, the U.S. has expanded its military bases in Honduras from 10 to 13. U.S. “aid” funds the Honduran National Police, whose long-time Director, Juan Carlos Bonilla, was [trained](#) at the School of the Americas.

Atrocities against Hondurans increased under the U.S. favorite, President Hernández, who [vowed](#) to “put a soldier on every corner.”

SOUTHCOM [worked](#) under Obama’s Central America Regional Security Initiative, which supported Operation Morazán: a program to integrate Honduras’s Armed Forces with its domestic policing units. With SOUTHCOM funding, the 250-person Special Response Security Unit (TIGRES) was [established](#) near Lepaterique. The TIGRES are [trained](#) by the U.S. Green Berets or 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and [described](#) by the U.S. Army War College as a “paramilitary police force.”

The cover for setting up a military police force is countering narco- and human-traffickers, but the record shows that left-wing civilians are targeted for death and intimidation. To crush the pro-Zelaya, pro-democracy movements Operation Morazán, [according](#) to the U.S. Army War College, included the creation of the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), whose members must have served at least one year in the Armed Forces. By January 2018, the PMOP [consisted](#) of 4,500

personnel in 10 battalions across every region of Honduras, and had [murdered](#) at least 21 street protestors.

BERTA CACERES ASSASSINATION

Berta Cáceres co-founded COPINH (the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras). One of COPINH's missions was resisting the [Desarrollos Energéticos](#) (DESA) corporation's Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River, which is sacred to the Lenca people. DESA hired a gang, later convicted of murdering Cáceres. They included the [U.S.-trained](#) Maj. Mariano Díaz Chávez and Lt. Douglas Geovanny Bustillo, himself head of security at DESA. The company's director, David Castillo, also a [U.S.-trained](#) ex-military intelligence officer, is alleged to have colluded with the killers. The TIGRE forces [oversaw](#) the dam's construction site.

Between 2010 and 2016, as U.S. "aid" and training continued to flow, [over 120](#) environmental activists were murdered by hitmen, gangs, police, and the military for opposing illegal logging and mining. Others have been intimidated. In 2014, for instance, a year after the murder of three Matute people by gangs linked to a mining operation, the children of the indigenous Tolupan leader, Santos Córdoba, were [threatened at gunpoint](#) by the U.S.-trained, ex-Army General, Filánder Uclés, and his bodyguards.

Home to the Regional Military Training Center, Bajo Aguán is a low-lying region in the east, whose farmers have battled land privatization since the early-1990s. After Zelaya was deposed, crimes against the peoples of the region increased. Rights groups signed a letter to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who facilitated U.S. aid to Honduras, [stating](#): "Forty-five people associated with peasant organizations have been killed" between September 2009 and February 2012.

A joint military-police project, Operation Xatruch II in 2012, led to the deaths of "nine peasant organization members, including two principal leaders." One 17-year-old son of a peasant organizer was kidnapped, tortured, and threatened with being burned alive. Lawfare is also used, with over 160 small farmers in the area subject to frivolous legal proceedings.

"BACK TO THE PAST"

In the 1980s, Tomás Nativí, co-founder of the People's Revolutionary Union, was "disappeared" by U.S.-backed death squads. Nativí's wife, Bertha Oliva, founded the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras to fight for justice for those murdered between 1979 and 1989. She [told](#) The Intercept that the recent killings and restructuring of the so-called security state is "like going back to the past."

The iron-fist of Empire in the service of capitalism never loosens its grip. The names and command structures of U.S.-backed military units in Honduras have changed over the last four decades, but their goal remains the same.

(T. J. Coles is director of the Plymouth Institute for Peace Research and the author of several books, including [Voices for Peace](#) (with Noam Chomsky and others) and [Fire and Fury: How the US Isolates North Korea, Encircles China and Risks Nuclear War in Asia](#) (both Clairview Books).)

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The normalcy of "eternal emergencies" in Guatemala and Honduras

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