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THE CARIBBEAN WAR

The United States in the Caribbean, 1898-1998

According to popular American accounting methods, the United States has been engaged in only eleven wars (American Revolution, War of 1812, Mexican-American War, Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan), winning nine and fighting to a draw in two. Although the Caribbean Basin has been the principal theater of conflict for only one of these wars the American military presence in the Caribbean has been neither sporadic nor peripheral. American military action in the Caribbean, ranging from the occasional deployment of warships to full-scale invasions, has been strong and continuous for the last one hundred years. American soldiers have fought and died in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Grenada. They have killed thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of Caribbean residents. They have destroyed bridges, mined harbors, bombed guerrilla bases, and trained other armies to fight on their behalf. America has been at war in the Caribbean for at least one hundred years, and it is not likely that this war will soon end.

America's Caribbean War began in Cuba in 1898, when the United States replaced Spain and England as the masters of the Caribbean. The colonial legacy America inherited placed it in opposition to aspiring Caribbean nationalists, who had struggled for their personal freedom and national independence long before the United States intervened. African slaves launched the hemisphere's first social revolution in 1791, when they rose to liberate themselves and their country from French bondage. Cubans and Puerto Ricans launched a war for independence in 1868 and, over the next thirty years, suffered over 200,000 losses in a brutal war against Spain. Despite their grievous suffering, American historians don't even give them a name in their struggle, implicitly acknowledging that as a result of America's triumph over Spain the United States became an imperial power. The name and results of the "Splendid Little War" reflect typical North American disdain for the Caribbean, a region and a people destined, in the American mind, to remain subordinate to the United States.

American policy makers and citizens regard the Caribbean conflicts as “police actions” rather than wars partly because they treat the region as if it were domestic territory. The most bellicose term used for these conflicts, intervention, falls short of capturing the aggressive action that it actually represents. An intervention is interference, through the use or threat of force, in the internal affairs of another nation. It is, by definition, a violation of sovereignty, an act of war. Because the lands of the Caribbean fall within the scope of America’s self-proclaimed jurisdiction, Americans do not believe that they have violated any country’s sovereignty and therefore have not committed an act of war. Only the war against Spain merited a declaration of war by the U.S. Congress. Even before 1945, when declarations of war went out of fashion in Washington, the United States government refused to honor its adversaries in the Caribbean by declaring an official war against them.

Interventions are wars, not police actions. The “intervention” in the Dominican Republic in 1965 was an act of war, as was the American invasion of Grenada (1982) and Panama (1989). The list of America’s battles during its Caribbean War goes further. American soldiers fought in and occupied Cuba (1898-1902, 1906-1909, 1912), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924, 1965), Haiti (1915-1934), Nicaragua (1927-1932), Grenada, and Panama. Moreover, American officers, soldiers, and intelligence agents fought by proxy in Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Colombia, to name only the most significant American operations of the last twenty years. American gunboats, deployed by Washington to show the flag and the force behind it, have appeared off the coast of virtually every Caribbean country at some point in the twentieth century.

America has been at war in the Caribbean Basin since 1898. The innumerable naval deployments, invasions, interventions, occupations, and covert actions commanded or sponsored by the United States constitute different battles in a war for control of the Caribbean. It is an unconventional war, with pitched battles between standing armies being the exception rather than the rule. With more determination than material resources, the people of the Caribbean have resisted their Spanish, British, French, and American adversaries using guerrilla strategies and tactics, a tradition that exists independently of the alleged master guerrilla theorists in Europe and Asia. To Americans, the guerrilla campaigns generally represent skirmishes or acts of banditry. If they dare to honor the insurgents by giving them a political motivation, they deride them as being communist dupes led by Soviet or Cuban masters. Ironically the political objective Americans deny is the one that would not exist were it not for their presence on Caribbean soil: respect for national sovereignty, the dominant theme that runs through all Caribbean resis-

tance, from Toussaint Louverture through Augusto Cesar Sandino to Che Guevara.

The American attempt to deny the existence of warfare in the region is partly a reflection of Americans' consistent denial that they are often the problem, not the solution. If one denigrates Nicaraguan patriot Sandino as a bandit, then the cause for which he fights—the removal of American troops—is nonexistent, and the war against him is a police action, not a war. To Sandino's descendants and admirers, Nicaraguan patriots warred against American troops and won their political rights. More recently, Americans viewed the Contra War as a minor civil conflict, the cause and location of which they could hardly identify, except to say that it led to a huge political scandal in Washington. The Nicaraguan government, with an annual budget of only \$2 billion, had to divert 40% of its revenues to the war effort. Strangled economically by an American embargo as well, the Nicaraguan economy plummeted even further, as inflation and unemployment skyrocketed in the 1980s. Meanwhile, up to 5,000 Nicaraguans died in 1984 alone, and another 400,000 became homeless.¹

The deployment of American military force in the region has generally been so overwhelming that resistance appears as futile as it is frequent. Caribbean nationalists have opposed American intervention with the same fervor and determination with which they opposed the Spanish, French, and British imperialists who preceded them. The odds they face don't determine the justice of the fight, only the strategy. Confronted with overwhelming military superiority—whether Spanish conquistadores, Napoleon's infantry, or the British navy—Caribbean nationalists use the terrain and climate to their advantage, adopting guerrilla strategies long before Mao Tse-Tung, Colonel T. E. Lawrence, General Vo Nguyen Giap, and even Che Guevara explained how they did it.

Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolutionaries first applied guerrilla warfare against the French, British, and Spanish forces that attempted to keep them in bondage. General Louverture, commanding as many as 55,000 troops, taught Napoleon's generals harsh lessons about guerrilla warfare before the Spanish resistance on the Iberian Peninsula earned the name "guerrillas" and gave guerrilla warfare its modern name and tactics.² The specter of a racial and social revolution compelled the American and Euro-

1. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 307.

2. For the history of the Haitian revolution, see the classic by C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

pean powers to launch a concerted effort to suppress, then contain the Haitian revolution. The price they paid in human lives reflects their stubborn determination and the equally stubborn Haitian insistence on their liberation. The British lost 100,000 soldiers and the French lost another 50,000 in their counter-insurgency campaigns.³ Are we to believe that so many soldiers died in a police action, not a war?

The “civilized powers” ultimately failed in their efforts to subdue the Haitian patriots, but in the process they established a policy of containment that all of them would subsequently apply in their imperialist wars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. British General Thomas Maitland, prior to withdrawing his battered forces in 1798, secured an agreement with Louverture whereby the Haitian leader promised not to launch a liberating expedition against the British colony of Jamaica. The United States feared that Maitland’s agreement with Louverture represented recognition of Haitian independence. If it did, the American Ambassador in London informed the British government that the United States would oppose it. Once “radical” American revolutionaries, including then President John Adams and his principal political opponent, Thomas Jefferson, united in opposition to the prospect of an independent black republic. If Toussaint’s army of liberation triumphed, Jefferson predicted: “We may expect therefore black crews, and supercargoes and missionaries thence into the Southern states. [...] If this combination can be introduced among us under any veil whatever, we have to fear it.” President Adams, like Jefferson, had a deep emotional commitment to revolution and independence in Latin America, but this ideological commitment stopped short of endorsing the application of those principles to former African slaves and mulatto political leaders, regardless of their apparent ideological affinities.⁴

To allay American concerns about the threat to regional security implicit in the recognition of a black Caribbean republic, the British and Americans informally agreed to contain the Haitian revolutionaries. Without negotiating with or even advising Toussaint, the British and Americans promised to divide Haiti’s lucrative but declining trade between them. Secondly, acting again as if they had the right to determine Haiti’s commercial policy, they stipulated that no third party could carry commerce to or from Haiti. Most importantly, they agreed that no native of the island, excepting Louverture or his designated representative, could leave the island. Toussaint, who

3. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean* (New York: Random House, 1970), 251–254.

4. Lester Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean: United States-European Rivalry in the Gulf-Caribbean, 1776-1904* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), 32.

dreamed of liberating African slaves throughout the region, would not be able to export his brand of radicalism across the Caribbean, destroying foreign lives and property in the process. Guns and diseases, not Anglo-American diplomacy, ultimately determined the fate of Haiti, of course, but the British-American agreement of 1798 first exposed the American objective of either suppressing or containing radical revolutionaries in the Caribbean.

Twenty-five years later, President James Monroe enunciated this policy objective as a doctrine and applied it to the Caribbean. The famous Monroe Doctrine contained an explicit endorsement of European colonialism in the Caribbean. At the time of his state of the union address (1823), all the Caribbean islands, with the notable exception of Haiti, remained under European rule. Monroe explicitly disclaimed any American intent to interfere with the existing colonies, a practical denial, given that any contrary statement could have led to war with the European powers. However, Monroe had no intention of liberating the Caribbean colonies because he did not believe those people worthy of the democratic principles he allegedly defended. President John Quincy Adams, the principal author of the Monroe Doctrine, feared that any liberation movement on the Caribbean islands might have resulted in “another Haiti.” In 1826 his secretary of state, Henry Clay, informed Latin American diplomats that the United States favored the continuation of Spanish rule over Cuba and Puerto Rico because “the population itself [...] is incompetent, at present, from its composition and its amount, to maintain self-government.”⁵ Adams and all of his nineteenth century successors preferred European colonialism to “another Haiti,” just as American presidents in the late twentieth century preferred American intervention or Caribbean dictatorships to “another Cuba.”

While the origins of America’s containment policy date to 1798, the United States only assumed the burden of applying it to the Caribbean in the 1890s. In 1895, when a boundary dispute between Venezuela and Great Britain introduced the unwelcome prospect of British gunboats appearing again in “American” waters, the United States demanded that the British submit the dispute to international arbitration. In explaining the American position, Secretary of State Richard Olney announced that the United States “is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subject to which it confines its interposition.”⁶ The British, though appalled by the arrogant presumption of the Americans, recognized that their long-term interests in the

5. Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 42-43.

6. Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century: U.S.-Latin American Relations since 1889* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 11.

region would be served best by an accommodation with the Americans. They accepted arbitration in the Venezuelan case, implicitly endorsing American hegemony.

It took a humiliating war for the Spanish to recognize the same thing. The war with Spain marked the opening battle of America's war for the Caribbean. The United States entered the war, not to obtain independence for Cubans and Puerto Ricans, but to maintain order and stability, prevent radical revolution, acquire overseas bases, and gain access to foreign markets and resources. When the Spanish flag went down the American flag went up, and it stayed there for four years. The prospect of another Haiti, stirred by negative assessments of the Cuban character and potential, prevented the United States from recognizing Cuban independence. American generals, having observed their nominal Cuban allies during the war, denigrated them mercilessly after it. General William R. Shafter mocked the idea of a self-governing island, charging, "why those people are no more fit for self-government than gunpowder is for hell." General Samuel B.M. Young raised the specter of Haiti more directly by charging "they [the Cubans] are no more capable of self-government than the savages of Africa." One could easily dismiss these comments as the ravings of racist military officers if the attitudes that they expressed most blatantly did not find their way into politics and law. Governor General Leonard Wood, administrator of the American occupation from 1899 to 1902, claimed that the enlightened Cuban class, meaning the white upper class, did not favor independence. "The only people who are howling for [independence] [...] are those whose antecedents and actions demonstrate the impossibility of self-government at present." [Pérez 100]

In 1898, the United States was no more prepared to recognize Cuban independence than it had been to recognize Haitian independence one hundred years earlier. The American occupation forces remained on the island until the United States devised and the Cubans accepted a form of limited self-government under American supervision. Through the Platt Amendment, the United States restricted Cuban sovereignty by retaining "the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence" and "the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty." The amendment, incorporated into the Cuban constitution at the insistence of the United States, also restricted Cuba's right to negotiate foreign treaties and international debts without American approval [Pérez 109–110]. Cuba became a United States protectorate but Puerto Rico fared even worse, the island being transferred as a territorial possession from Spain to the United States by the Treaty of Paris.

Having concluded that the Caribbean people could not govern themselves, the United States assumed responsibility for governing them. By assuming that burden from Spain and England, the United States accepted the primary responsibility for making war against the Caribbean nationalists who refused to accept any foreign rule. Teddy Roosevelt accepted the burden but refused to acknowledge the war. The United States would intervene, Roosevelt announced in his famous corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, to prevent and prosecute “chronic wrong-doing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society.”⁷ Being less than civilized or worse—impotent—the people of the Caribbean could not police and govern themselves. The failure of the Cubans to maintain orderly self-government led Roosevelt to dispatch another occupying force to the island in 1906, confirming the American truism that Cubans could not govern themselves.

Roosevelt’s paternalism mollified Cuban nationalists no better than its Spanish variant earlier. Intervention in Cuba and throughout the region became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The United States government, having asserted that it would intervene, did. In the process, the United States fueled a virulent anti-American nationalism throughout the region. When nationalists challenged American interventions militarily or diplomatically, they increased the likelihood of triggering or prolonging interventions they denounced. Consequently, in the two decades after the Roosevelt corollary, the United States battled against nationalists in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, while it occupied or maintained protectorates in Puerto Rico and Panama.

During the opening phase of America’s Caribbean War (1898-1932), the United States intervened directly and frequently with American troops. Despite regular condemnations of American intervention at Latin American diplomatic conferences, the United States insisted that it had the right and duty to dispatch troops to any Latin American country. Showing little concern for public opinion at home or abroad, not to mention the American congress, American presidents dispatched troops and gunboats at will. They soon found themselves embroiled in counter-insurgency campaigns that they consistently misunderstood and mislabeled, calling them police actions and wars against bandits.

The “bandits,” in fact, led patriotic resistance to American imperialism. In 1918, the spirit and tactics of Toussaint Louverture emerged under the command of Charlemagne Peralte, a Haitian nationalist who led an army of 5,000 cacos in 131 encounters with the American marines. To suppress the insur-

7. Lester D. Langley, *The United States and the Caribbean in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 29.

gents, two marines disguised themselves as cacos, infiltrated the guerrilla encampment, and shot Peralte dead. The insurrection continued after Peralte's death, with at least 2,000 Haitians losing their lives in a war noted for its barbarity.⁸

While Haitian peasants warred against the marines on the western part of Hispaniola, Dominican peasants fought them on eastern side. From 1917 to 1922, eight to twelve guerrilla bands, with as many as 600 regular fighters, engaged the marines 370 times. The most important rebel leader, General Ramón Natera, explicitly stated the political objective of his guerrilla campaign: the termination of American occupation of the Dominican Republic. The Americans, however, usually derided all the resistance as *gavilleros*, the Dominican term for bandits. Their guerrilla campaign, another battlefield in America's Caribbean War, matches the scale and scope of subsequent guerrilla campaigns. Fidel Castro's rebel army, for example, numbered much less than 1,000 regular fighters for most of its existence. Yet in the Dominican Republic, the Marines officially acknowledged killing or wounding 950 guerrillas, making Dominican losses larger than the rebel column Che Guevara marched across the island in the fall of 1958. According to historian Bruce Calder, the Dominican counter-insurgency campaign "deserves a place in the series of guerrilla wars which the United States has fought, from the Philippines to Vietnam."⁹

Natera never attained the recognition that Sandino received for his opposition to American military intervention in his beloved Nicaragua. From 1927 to 1933, Sandino's guerrilla army attacked, harassed, and eluded the American marines. The standard American term for Sandino was "bandit," but his more creative adversaries referred to him as a "mule thief." To suppress this mule thief, the United States deployed 5,000 marines in 1929, the largest American military deployment in the Caribbean prior to 1965. Yet the Americans could not capture the elusive patriot or induce his betrayal. The war became as unpopular in the United States as it was abroad, compelling President Herbert Hoover to withdraw the marines after supervising presidential elections of 1932. After the marines left, Sandino entered Managua, having accomplished his objective of driving the Americans out of the country. The Americans would claim, of course, that they didn't lose the battle; they just decided not to fight any longer. General Anastasio Somoza García, commander of the American-trained Nicaraguan National Guard,

8. Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press), 160-165.

9. Bruce Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic during the U.S. Occupation of 1916-1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 115.

picked up the fight where the Marines left it. He disposed of Sandino in 1934 and took presidential power for himself; he and his two sons served as American surrogates for the next forty-five years.

The United States installed surrogates throughout the Caribbean. Beginning first in the Dominican Republic, where Rafael Leonida Trujillo assumed dictatorial powers with American acquiescence, Caribbean strongmen maintained order on behalf of American troops. With strongmen like Somoza and Trujillo in power, the United States withdrew militarily, shielded politically and diplomatically by the Good Neighbor Policy (1933-1945), by which the United States officially denied the right to intervene in Latin American affairs. The policy said nothing about indirect interventions, so occupation and intervention by proxy became the norm. During this second phase of America's Caribbean War, the Caribbean enjoyed relative peace at the high price of democracy. Dictators Fulgencio Batista (1934-1944, 1952-1958), Trujillo (1930-1961), Jorge Ubico (1931-1944), Tiburcio Carias Andino (1932-1948), and Somoza (1934-1956) maintained domestic order so well in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua that the United States did not have to use its forces to protect American interests.

Franklin Roosevelt's policy of non-intervention won Caribbean allies during World War II. The dictatorial character of these friendly regimes mattered less than their cooperation in the war against fascism abroad and social revolution at home. Caribbean dictators put ports and resources at the service of the American war effort, while their armies received more American military training and supplies. The Caribbean War focused temporarily not on the repression of domestic enemies but the perceived Nazi menace to regional security. From bases in Panama, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, American naval, army, and air forces patrolled the region, while their regional allies assisted by containing German and Japanese activity within their borders. The war on the high seas obstructed Caribbean trade with Europe and Asia, making the Caribbean region more dependent on the American market for the consumption of its export commodities, primarily bananas, sugar, and oil. By war's end, the United States had integrated the Caribbean even more tightly into its political, economic, and military orbit, double-locking the system, as Walter LaFeber explained it [LaFeber 87-95].

The proxy armies trained during World War II became more effective political and military instruments after it. In 1945 the Caribbean militaries entered the Cold War arena prepared to carry out the police duties and counter-insurgency campaigns previously performed by American armed forces, this time in the name of anti-communism. By the Rio Pact of 1948, the United States formally allied with all Latin American armies in the war against com-

munism, defined in a way that classified domestic revolutionaries as agents of international communism. That definition provided a convenient cover for American intervention for the next fifty years. Cacos, gavilleros, and mule thieves became communists, reds, and Soviet agents, new names in an old war.

Ardent Caribbean nationalists knew of and took pride in their history of resistance. Charlemagne Peralte, Ramón Natera, and Augusto César Sandino were neither bandits nor communists; they were nationalists. Inspired by the democratic foundations of the American war against fascism, nationalistic leaders like Pepe Figueres of Costa Rica, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro of Nicaragua, Juan José Arévalo of Guatemala, Eduardo Chibás of Cuba, Rómulo Betancourt of Colombia, and Juan Bosch of the Dominican Republic challenged dictatorial rule and, to a lesser extent, American hegemony. Some of the dictators fell without a fight, as in the case of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, but others clung to power using the expanded power of the armies trained by the Americans and recasting themselves as America's loyal anti-communist allies. To remove the other strongmen, nationalists formed the Caribbean Legion, a militant group supported primarily by the reformist regimes of Pepe Figueres in Costa Rica and Juan José Arévalo in Guatemala.¹⁰ Committed to armed rebellion against Trujillo and Somoza, notorious violators of the four freedoms the United States once defended, this Caribbean Legion won no sympathy in Washington. The United States preferred Trujillo and Somoza over their democratic opponents because they maintained order in a volatile region whose people remained "unfit" for self-government.

The failure of the United States to embrace the post-war wave of nationalistic reformers alienated a generation of political activists, first and most noticeably Jacobo Arbenz and the young communist activists who supported his revolutionary regime (1951-1954). American suspicions of the Guatemalan revolution had been aroused during Arévalo's administration, partly because of his support for the Caribbean Legion, but when Arbenz enacted an agrarian reform in 1952, he confirmed American suspicions about communist infiltration. In an earlier time, the American president would have dispatched the Marines to dispatch Arbenz, but in the third phase of the Caribbean War President Eisenhower could use a number of his weapons in his formidable arsenal, including the Central Intelligence Agency. He could also use the Guatemalan military, but its officers showed little inclination to depose a constitutionally elected president. To nudge the officers into action, the CIA organized a proxy rebel army under the command of the anti-communist

10. Charles Ameringer, *The Caribbean Legion: Patriots, Politicians, Soldiers of Fortune, 1946-1950* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. With only 150 troops under his command, Castillo presented no match for the Guatemalan army. However, with American naval units anchored off both coasts, Guatemalan military officers knew that an attack on Washington's surrogates meant a war against the United States, and they refused to fight their benefactors. Instead, they deposed their president and steered Guatemala back into the United States orbit at little cost in life or money to the Americans.

Jacobo Arbenz, although traditionally portrayed as a democratic nationalist and a naïve victim of American aggression, admired the Soviet Union, collaborated with the Guatemalan communist party, and hoped to accelerate Guatemala's transition to a socialist society.¹¹ Despite his communist inclinations, neither he nor his army represented a serious military threat to Caribbean security. The army remained firmly under anti-communist command, and the only effort to bring in Soviet bloc weapons to arm a people's militia only hastened Arbenz's demise. Washington could easily control Guatemalan military affairs, but it could not so easily contain the political threat he represented. If he successfully defied American policy by pursuing a non-aligned foreign policy and confiscating American property, other Caribbean nationalists would undoubtedly do the same.

Ironically, the American coup in Guatemala inspired Caribbean nationalists to do the same anyway. Arbenz's failure instructed the militant revolutionaries who came in his wake, namely Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Carlos Fonseca, and Yon Sosa. These revolutionaries recognized that Arbenz had pursued the right domestic policies and the wrong defensive strategy. The Guatemalan experience demonstrated to them that the United States would not accept revolution even if it occurred within the established constitutional and democratic institutions. The United States opposed any radical social and economic reform implemented by any ideological associate of its Soviet adversary. Arbenz represented a post-war variant of the "chronic wrong-doing" that had threatened regional security prior to the war. By destroying his moderate brand of communism, the United States alienated other nationalists and turned arm-chair revolutionaries into guerrillas, laying waste to the ideological middle ground and intensifying the Caribbean War.

The next battlefield in the war emerged in eastern Cuba. Learning from the mistakes made by Arbenz, Castro and his top military adviser, Che Guevara, designed a strategy to take and defend revolutionary power. Fighting a guerrilla campaign against a proxy army, they benefited from Washington's desire to avoid committing American troops to Cuba again. This proxy

11. Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 134-148.

army, however, with little or no training in counter-insurgency, fared terribly when matched against Castro's skilled and determined guerrillas. As Castro's guerrilla campaigns gained popularity on the island and in the American press, American intervention became less likely. President Eisenhower kept United States forces on the sidelines at Guantanamo, while Che Guevara marched his rebel column across the island and drove Batista out of power.

Within a year of Castro's assumption of power, the United States recognized that it had lost a critical battle in its Caribbean War. As Castro threatened American lives, property, and regional security, the CIA dusted off its Guatemalan model and applied it Cuba, hoping to recoup American losses. With a proxy army ten times larger than the one that had deposed Arbenz, the CIA attempted to overthrow a government ten times more powerful. Having learned to anticipate a counter-revolutionary movement orchestrated by the United States, Castro and Che had organized a powerful army and militia, both of them prepared to meet Americans or their surrogates on whatever beach they selected. The result was the disaster at the Bay of Pigs, where a Caribbean army brought superior forces to the field and repulsed an American intervention.

No president had ever suffered such a humiliating defeat in the Caribbean War. To avenge his honor and recover American losses, President Kennedy unleashed Operation Mongoose, another covert campaign designed to cripple the Cuban economy and, if possible, eliminate the Cuban revolutionary leadership. To defend Cuba Castro accepted a Soviet proposal to install nuclear missiles on the island. Even though the Cubans would not have command authority over the missiles, Castro thereby demonstrated the truth of the nineteenth century axiom that Cubans were "no more fit for self-government than gunpowder is for hell." To President Kennedy and his advisors, no rational person—meaning no Cuban—would have wished for the military hell that they were about to unleash on it. The Pentagon's invasion plans called for 1,190 sorties on the first day of battle. A massive aerial and naval bombardment would be followed by an assault of the 82nd Airborne on airfields outside Havana and an attack of the 101st Division against the airfield at Mariel and Baracoa and the port of Mariel. Ten battalions of Marines would then land on Cuba's famous beaches between Havana and Varadero. These invading forces would have been opposed by 75,000 Cuban regular army troops, 200,000 militia, and up to 40,000 Soviet personnel. The Pentagon estimated that the combined airborne and amphibious operation would cost 1,000 American casualties per day. The entire invading force could have been wiped out if the Soviets fired their Luna missiles with tactical nuclear warheads.¹²

In late October 1962, the Caribbean War threatened to erupt in a catastrophic thermonuclear conflagration. The American preparations for war constituted the largest mobilization of men and equipment since World War II. Fortunately, the Americans and Soviets negotiated a peaceful resolution of the issues that divided them, but Castro, irate over his exclusion from the negotiations, refused to back down. He intensified the war against American imperialism. Operating from a secure base and bankrolled by the Soviet Union, Castro recruited and trained guerrilla armies and threw them into battle throughout the Caribbean basin and beyond.

By 1963, according to CIA estimates, the Cuban government had trained 1,500 to 2,000 Latin Americans in guerrilla warfare. Cuban-trained and supported guerrilla bands operated in Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Venezuela. The CIA regarded the guerrilla movements in Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala as the most serious threats to regional security.¹³

In response, the Kennedy administration stepped up training and support for Latin American counter-insurgency campaigns. Kennedy realized that the United States could no longer depend on surrogates to defend American strategic interests. He ordered a dramatic increase in Special Forces strength to meet the guerrilla challenge and ordered the elite troops to wear the Green Beret. The Navy and Air Force followed suit, creating their own elite counter-guerrilla units and training their best troops for unconventional warfare. The United States quickly developed an impressive counter-insurgency capability, with modern strategies, tactics, and technology that had not been available during Castro's Sierra Maestra campaign.¹⁴ So, as the Cuban-trained guerrillas took an intensified war to America's proxy armies, the United States sent equally intense and determined counter-insurgency teams after them.

While guerrillas clashed with American Green Berets or their surrogates in remote jungles and mountain strongholds, the Caribbean War occasionally erupted in conventional battle. The limited threat posed by

12. Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1990), 289–298; General Anatoli I. Gribkov and General William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: edition q, 1994), 5–7.

13. United States, Central Intelligence Agency, "Cuban Training of Latin American Subversives" (March 27, 1963), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

14. Michael T. Klare, *War without End: American Planning for the Next Vietnams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 38–41; Loveman and Davies, "Guerrilla Warfare, Revolutionary Theory, and Revolutionary Movements," in Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, rev. ed. (Wilmingon, Del.: SR Books, 1997), 21.

Dominican reformists in 1965 compelled President Lyndon B. Johnson to dispatch 25,000 marines to prevent “another Cuba.” [Langley, 251-259] Although cloaked in multi-lateralism by the Organization of American States, the invasion represented the first direct deployment of American forces to the Caribbean since the withdrawal of the marines from Nicaragua in 1933. Amid rumors that Che Guevara was in Santo Domingo stirring up trouble, the United States crushed a challenge before it became one. The Dominican intervention demonstrated that Americans would use force if and when necessary to carry out its self-assumed obligations to maintain order and stability.

The United States generally relied on covert operations and proxy armies to fight its Caribbean War in the late twentieth century. These counter-insurgency campaigns remain the least-known battles of the Caribbean War—by American design. Covert and unconventional, they are ongoing battles in a long war. The ideological outlook of Carlos Fonseca differs dramatically from Sandino, his guerrilla parent, but his campaign against the Somoza dynasty represented a continuation of the same struggle for Nicaraguan sovereignty. The fact that Cubans supported his Sandinista army does not deny the nationalistic origins of his cause.

Widespread Nicaraguan opposition to the Somoza dynasty, perceived as a puppet regime created and sustained by the United States, could not have been generated solely by Cuban agents and their communist collaborators. Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, a non-Sandinista, led the opposition to the Somoza regime until his assassination in January 1978. Sandinista militants led the insurrection through to victory, but the 40,000 Nicaraguans who died during the fighting did not all belong to the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional. The Sandinistas provided military leadership and training to a multi-class, multi-party coalition that terminated one of the most corrupt and brutal regimes in Caribbean history.

The Sandinista victory represented a significant battlefield gain for America’s opponents, but the triumph of Ronald Reagan in 1980 meant a return to a hard-line military policy in the Caribbean. Determined to win the Cold War and contain if not reverse Soviet gains in the Americas, the Reagan administration intensified the war by either restoring or increasing military aid to regimes that had lost aid because they failed to adhere to the human rights standards applied by the Carter administration. At the same time, guerrilla movements inspired or sponsored by Cuba and Nicaragua in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia intensified their ground campaigns with more Soviet and Cuban support. As a result the war expanded in scale and increased in its brutality. Through proxy armies in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Colombia, the United States fought to contain the revolutionary advances.

Through a proxy rebel army operating against Nicaragua from Honduran bases, the United States attempted to reverse the revolutionary progress of the Sandinistas. With both sides driving for victory and money, arms, and advisers pouring in from the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, casualty rates soared, regional economies plummeted, and migrants fled the war-torn region.

American troops remained on the sidelines during the battle for Central America, but Reagan was not averse to sending American soldiers into combat. The assassination of revolutionary Maurice Bishop of Grenada in 1983 by leftist hard-liners compelled Reagan to dispatch American troops to restore order and reverse the revolutionary gains on that island country. The invasion also sent a clear message to Sandinista leaders that the United States would use its own troops to protect American interests and maintain the type of regional order that it had always demanded.

President George Bush launched a quick and decisive conventional strike against Panama in 1989 to remove General Manuel Noriega and bring him to trial in the United States. This invasion, launched to arrest a foreign head of state, represented something old and something new. The United States had exercised an international police power over the Caribbean since the days of Teddy Roosevelt. It had never, however, invaded any country to bring an indicted foreign leader to trial in the United States for violating American laws. The extension of the American judicial system to the Caribbean by American troops reflected the extent to which the region had been incorporated into the American orbit. While the United States lost significant battles at the Bay of Pigs and Managua, it had also registered significant victories. In 1998 the Caribbean was even more deeply integrated into the American system than it had been in 1898. Americans were losing some battles but still winning the war.

American troops have fought and died in battle throughout the Caribbean. The war in which they fought has not been named because Americans prefer to deny its existence. The Caribbean War has been fought to acquire and maintain an informal empire. Through direct invasions, covert operations, police actions, and counter-insurgency campaigns, American troops have fought a prolonged and often vicious fight against Caribbean nationalists, reformers, revolutionaries, dictators, and drug runners. Fortunately for Americans, they have suffered few casualties during the Caribbean War. Unfortunately for the Caribbean people, they have suffered grievous losses that have yet to be tabulated. Perhaps more than two hundred thousand people died during the recent battle for Central America, few of them trained as

soldiers or militants. Hundreds of thousands, probably millions, have fled the war zones, another sign of the devastating nature of this unnamed conflict.

Today, the war on drugs has replaced the war against communism as the leitmotiv of United States policy, another new name for an old war. With guerrilla bands sustained by drug trafficking in Colombia, yet another battlefield in the Caribbean War has escalated to a scale not seen since the battle for Central America. Although many of the guerrilla soldiers are probably true “bandits,” an American military intervention against them would still provoke angry nationalistic responses from Colombians and their neighbors. The fundamental issue for the Caribbean people is their sovereignty, not their drugs. The United States is therefore compelled to prosecute the war through proxies, supported by friendly regional governments and international organizations.

If and when necessary, the United States can and will act unilaterally and decisively. The loss of the Panama Canal and its associated military bases has not diminished American military power in the region. The U.S. Southern Command, formerly based in Panama, now resides in Miami. Its mission remains the same:

to shape the environment within our area of responsibility [Latin America] by conducting military to military engagement and counterdrug activities throughout the theater to promote democracy, stability, and collective approaches to threats to regional security. The command will, when required, respond unilaterally or multilaterally to crises that threaten regional stability or national interests, and prepare to meet future hemispheric challenges.”¹⁵

In addition, special force units commanded by SOUTHCOM are based at the Naval Station at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, where 2,400 military personnel are stationed. The United States still maintains the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and it has also established forward operating locations at Comalapa, El Salvador; Comayagua, Honduras; Aruba and Curaçao.¹⁶

America is well positioned and motivated to fight and win its Caribbean War. Yet over the course of one hundred years, America’s battlefield victories have been short-lived. The United States has yet to find a peaceful solution to this bitter regional war. The application of military power may win a temporary reprieve, but the issues that have generated the conflicts remain unsolved. The battlefield in Colombia is littered with the graves of the fallen

15. USSOUTHCOM Mission, United States Southern Command, “Mission Statement,” <www.southcom.mil/home/mission.cfm>.

16. Elizabeth Becker, “Senate Bill Proposes Closing Roosevelt Roads—White House Plans New Vieques Meetings,” *New York Times* (December 16, 1999); Adam Isacson and Joy Olson, “Just the Facts 2001-2002: A Quick Tour of U.S. Defense and Security Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean,” *International Policy Report* (October 2001).

and many more will fall before the conflict is resolved. The war may once again come to Cuba, where the fall or death of Fidel Castro may end the delicate truce that has prevailed for forty years. The ongoing conflicts over Colombia and Cuba are the latest stages in a prolonged war. The locations of the battles have rotated around the region, but one consistent theme captures the origins of the conflict and hints at its possible solution: the United States and its surrogates have warred consistently against Caribbean nationalists who protest violations of their sovereignty.