

Catholics, Evangelicals, and US Policy in Central America

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Summary

During the Cold War's earliest years, right-wing governments and oligarchic elites in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua fostered closer relationships with the Catholic Church. Dictatorial leaders like Guatemala's Carlos Castillo Armas and dynastic regimes like Nicaragua's Somoza family regarded the Church as an ally against supposed Marxist influence in the region. Those ties began to fray in the late 1960s, as the Second Vatican Council's foundational reforms moved Catholicism farther to the political and social left around the globe. This shift was especially prominent in Central America, where Catholics like El Salvador's Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero and Guatemala's Father Stanley Rother were among Central America's most visible critics and reformers as political violence increased across the region during the 1970s. Relatedly, evangelical Protestants, particularly Pentecostal groups based in the United States, flooded Central America throughout that decade. Their staunch anticommunism and established ties to influential policymakers and political lobbyists in the United States, among other factors, gave evangelical Protestants greater influence in US-Central American relations. Their influence was strongest during the early 1980s, when José Efraín Ríos Montt, an ordained Pentecostal minister with Eureka, California's Verbo Ministries, seized Guatemala's presidency via a coup in March 1982. Notable US evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson praised Ríos Montt's regime for its rabid anticommunist ideology, while President Ronald Reagan claimed that the dictator had received a "bum rap" in the global press. Concurrently, some US evangelical missionaries and pastors also foregrounded the Sandinista government's anti-Protestant activities as additional justification for US support for Nicaragua's Contra forces. Religious actors were also instrumental to Central America's peace processes after the Cold War, as Catholic and Protestant leaders alike worked closely with regional governments and the United States to end decades of political violence and enact meaningful socioeconomic reforms for the region's citizens.

Keywords: Catholicism, Evangelical Protestantism, Liberation Theology, Central America, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cold War, foreign policy

Subjects: History of Central America, 1945–1991, Church and Religious History, Diplomatic History

Religion, Politics, and US-Central American Cold War Relations

Religion was an important component of the United States' foreign policymaking decisions toward Central America during the Cold War. During that conflict's earliest years, US policymakers regarded the Catholic Church as a potentially valuable diplomatic and political ally, given the Church's staunch anticommunism and cordial ties with authoritarian, right-wing strongmen like Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza García and Guatemala's Carlos Castillo Armas. By the 1960s, the Church's relationship with regional leaders began to fray as the Second Vatican Council's foundational reforms and Liberation Theology's growth placed greater emphasis on the poor, economic and social justice measures, and grassroots political activism. As Central

America's military dictatorships, particularly in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, responded with increasingly violent repression during the 1970s and 1980s, many Catholic activists in those countries, as well as in the United States, consistently brought attention to the crisis through various methods that included public outreach, Congressional testimony, and expanding grassroots solidarity networks. Their activism prompted many conservative US policymakers, especially in the Reagan administration, to view these Catholics as sympathetic to Marxist groups like El Salvador's *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), Guatemala's *Ejercito Guerrillero de Pobres* (EGP) and *Organización Revolucionario del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA), and Nicaragua's *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN). Relatedly, Protestants also played an important role in US policymaking, as some evangelical leaders and groups criticized the Reagan administration's policy approach toward the region, while groups like Eureka, California's Verbo Ministries were a strong influence on Guatemalan dictator Brigadier General José Efraín Ríos Montt. Ultimately, Catholic and Protestant leaders alike played a significant role in multilateral peace talks that halted the region's political violence and continued to inform US foreign policymaking processes in the post-Cold War era.

Historical Background

After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, Central America's two main political factions vied for control of the region. Conservative leaders like Guatemala's Rafael Carrera cultivated strong ties with the Church and wealthy landowners to maintain the traditional economic, political, and social power structures that kept them in power. By the late 19th century, however, opposing Liberal party leaders had assumed broad control of the region's politics. Notable Liberals like Guatemalan President Justo Rufino Barrios and his Nicaraguan counterpart, José Santos Zelaya, believed that economic expansion and strong, more secular states were central to their countries' modernization. As a part of this modernization process, Central American Liberals enacted multiple laws aimed at curbing the Catholic Church's political and social influence. These included acts that expropriated the Church's assets and property for state use, closed seminaries, authorized civil marriage, and expelled foreign priests and religious orders, particularly the Jesuits, from the region on multiple occasions.¹

Church-state relations did not begin to improve until the early 20th century. In Nicaragua, the country's Catholic hierarchy aligned itself with President José María Moncada after his election in 1928, despite his Liberal Party affiliation. As historian Manzar Foroohar has explained, the Nicaraguan hierarchy "conclude[ed] that maintaining all of the old privileges was impossible in the absence of a Conservative-dominated government . . . overcame its long-time hostility toward the Liberals, and entered a new era of friendship with them, hoping to minimize the traditional anticlerical policies of the Liberals."² The Church's overture to the Moncada government inaugurated a period of closer ties, and, by 1939, Nicaragua's new constitution reinstated the Church's tax exemptions and prohibited legislation that impeded the free exercise of any religion, including Catholicism.

A similar rapprochement occurred in Guatemala, where decades of anticlerical Liberal policies had decimated the Church: By the 1930s, Guatemala had approximately one priest for every 30,000 Catholics. The proportion was even worse in the country's western diocese of Huehuetenango, which had just two priests to serve over 176,000 people.³ The country's archbishop, Mariano Rossell y Arellano, recognized the dire need to rebuild the Guatemalan Church, but also understood that doing so would require support from President Jorge Ubico Castañeda (1931–1944). Rossell pragmatically convinced Ubico that a larger, stronger Catholic Church and improved Church–state relations would benefit both institutions because it would reinforce support for Ubico among wealthy Guatemalan Catholics, upon whom both Ubico and the Church depended for survival. Rossell also persuaded Ubico that a stronger, pro–government Church would be able to perform more pastoral work with the country's indigenous population, which was strongly anti–Ubico. In turn, Ubico readmitted foreign religious orders into the country, beginning with the Jesuit Society in 1937, followed by the return of Maryknoll, Salesian, Marist, Franciscan, and Dominican–affiliated priests and missionaries before his overthrow in 1944.

Central America's improved Church–state relations were an encouraging development for US policymakers during this period. By the early 1950s, State Department and Dwight Eisenhower administration officials viewed the Catholic Church as a potentially valuable foreign policy ally, given Catholicism's doctrinal opposition to communism and Central American Churches' cordial relationships with US–backed, authoritarian strongmen like Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza García. US officials were especially interested in using the Church as an ally in Guatemala, where Ubico's overthrow had launched a decade of sweeping political and socioeconomic reforms known as the Ten Years of Spring. These reforms, most notably an ambitious land redistribution plan known as Decree 900, alarmed US policymakers, who viewed the reforms, and Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán, as influenced by communism and the Soviet Union. US officials advocated enlisting the Guatemalan Church as a partner in Árbenz's overthrow: In early 1954, the CIA mounted a propaganda offensive in Guatemala which claimed that the Árbenz government, if allowed to remain in power, would “interfere with religious instruction in schools, with Catholic youth activities and other aspects of church life” and asked members of Guatemala's Catholic hierarchy to “warn the faithful against inevitable spiritual contamination through . . . commie–led fronts.”⁴ Rossell enthusiastically cooperated with the scheme, issuing a pastoral letter condemning communism in April of that year. Additionally, following Árbenz's overthrow on June 27, the Archbishop held a funeral mass for anti–Árbenz forces killed during the coup and Rossell attended a mid–July mass honoring his sixtieth birthday in front of Guatemala City's cathedral, where, according to an *El Imparcial* report, he declared that he had “faith in the liberation movement's triumph,” and had been ready to “give his blood” during the coup.⁵

US policymakers also sought the Church's assistance in resolving domestic crises in Honduras throughout 1954. After approximately 14,000 United Fruit Company workers in the country went on strike on May 5, San Pedro Sula Diocese Bishop Antonio Capdevilla Ferrando attempted to broker a settlement on the workers' behalf and forestall US military intervention.⁶ Later in the year, US officials looked to the Church again, as US Ambassador to Honduras Whiting Willauer suggested enlisting the country's Papal Nuncio, Bishop Antonio Taffi, to help form a short–term,

coalition government after a presidential election on October 10 failed to produce a decisive winner. Willauer informed State Department officials in Washington that using Taffi as a liaison was preferable to direct US involvement, as anti-American sentiment throughout Central America had increased following Árbenz's overthrow in Guatemala.

By the mid-1950s, then, US policymakers and Central American leaders like Castillo Armas and Somoza regarded the Catholic Church as an important partner in maintaining regional order and stability. By the end of that decade, however, foundational changes within Catholic social doctrine would have a transformative effect on the Church and its relationship with governments in Central America and the United States. These changes would ultimately move the Church more to the left politically and, subsequently, rekindle tensions with the state throughout the Cold War.

Catholicism's Transformation

The first of these changes occurred in October 1958, when Giuseppe Cardinal Roncalli, the Patriarch of Venice, was elected to the papacy as Pope Saint John XXIII. During his brief pontificate (1958–1963), John XXIII sought to modernize the Church via a process known as *aggiornamento*, Italian for “updating.” The most significant part of this process was the pope’s decision to convene the Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical meeting of the Church’s College of Cardinals and over 2,800 bishops from around the world. The Council met for four sessions between 1962 and 1965 and produced two dogmatic constitutions, two pastoral constitutions, three apostolic declarations, and nine apostolic decrees that fundamentally reshaped Catholic liturgy and the Church for modern times. Among the Council’s most significant changes were that it endorsed greater laypeople’s participation in the liturgy and encouraged priests to celebrate mass in local vernacular instead of the traditional Latin. The Council sessions also marked the first time that Catholicism officially recognized the right to religious freedom as a human right: The apostolic declaration *Dignitatis humanae* stated that “the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person . . . this right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.”⁷ This was important in places like Central America, where the *ladino* economic and political elite were Catholic but many people in the country’s indigenous majority still practiced indigenous rites or followed syncretic practices that infused traditional native beliefs with Christianity.

The Council also endorsed missionary work to an unprecedented degree. The apostolic decree *Ad gentes* lauded missionary activity as “nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God’s decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation.”⁸ *Ad gentes* specifically recognized the need for missionaries to work in “the poorer portions of the globe,” and called on clergy and lay Catholics alike to work closely with local pastors and bishops in those areas to fortify and expand the Church’s reach. Relatedly, the pope’s Ten Percent Plan called on all Catholic orders in the United States to send 10 percent of their personnel to Latin America in a large-scale mission project.⁹ Although the plan failed to meet this goal, thousands of Catholic religious and laity flooded into Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s.

The pope also emphasized human dignity and rights throughout his pontificate. One notable example of this was his 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, which proclaimed that greater respect for human dignity was central to economic equality for the working class and claimed that industrialization had allowed the global North to introduce “a new form of colonialism” in the decolonized world that threatened peace.¹⁰ The pontiff called on Catholics to give greater consideration to “those values which concern man’s dignity generally, and the immense worth of each individual human life,” and to engage in “a fruitful and well-regulated interchange of useful knowledge, capital and manpower” to facilitate that consideration in accordance with civil law.¹¹ This was historically remarkable because it stressed a need for cooperation with secular authority in order to fulfill the Church’s Christian vision. In this sense, *Mater et Magistra* functioned as a bridge between the ecclesiastical and temporal worlds. Likewise, his landmark 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* argued that governments had historically ignored a litany of mankind’s natural rights, including rights of food, medical care, “necessary social services,” freedom of religious association, political conscience, and emigration.¹² These rights formed what the pope described as a “natural law . . . that governs all moral conduct.”¹³ World peace, the pope argued, was impossible as long as temporal governments ignored the natural law. *Pacem in Terris* was also notable for its softened position on the Church’s relationship with Marxists. The Pope diverted from previous encyclicals which dismissed Marxism and communism out of hand, such as Leo XIII’s *Custodi di Quella Fede*, issued in 1892, and Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Divini Redemptoris*, issued respectively in 1931 and 1937.¹⁴ Instead, John XXIII proclaimed, “A man who has fallen into error [atheistic communism] does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity; and that is something that must always be taken into account.”¹⁵ Following the pontiff’s death in 1963, his successor, Paul VI, continued to make human rights advocacy, world peace, and the eradication of poverty central to Catholic social doctrine. During his first message as pope on June 22, 1963, Paul VI announced that the Vatican Council would continue to examine revisions to Catholic liturgy and the Church’s Code of Canon Law to give greater emphasis to “measures in favor of underdeveloped peoples, where the standard of living is sometimes not worthy of the human person . . . [and] a study of goodwill, internationally, for the improvement of living conditions.”¹⁶ He also praised Catholics serving the world’s poor and exhorted global political leaders to “contribute to the construction of an ever more just order in principles . . . animated by a very great will to defend peace.”¹⁷

The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* reinforced these positions and declared that all people are born with a shared, God-given dignity that is repudiated when a person’s rights are violated and that “although rightful differences exist between men, the equal dignity of persons demands that a more human and just condition of life be brought about. For excessive economic and social differences between the members of one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace.”¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* also stated that “Christians should cooperate willingly and wholeheartedly in establishing an international order that includes a genuine respect for all freedoms and amicable brotherhood between all . . . it is the duty of the whole People of God . . . to alleviate as far as they are able the sufferings of the modern age.”¹⁹ Similarly, the 1967 encyclical

Populorum Progressio declared that “progressive development . . . of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger [and] poverty . . . [and] are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization” was an urgent priority for the Church.²⁰

As the Church placed greater emphasis on issues like human rights and peace during the 1960s, some Latin American clergy sought ways to adapt these broader reforms to the region’s specific economic, political, and social problems. In 1967, the Church’s council of Latin American bishops, the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM), sponsored a seminar for priests in Santiago, Chile that drew clergy from fourteen different Latin American countries.²¹ The seminar was dedicated to analyzing *Populorum Progressio*’s substance and its meaning for Latin America. The seminar produced a document titled “*Populorum Progressio* and Latin American Realities” that lauded the encyclical’s spirit and pronouncements but also expressed fear that the region’s economic and political leaders ignored its message. The priests declared, “We fear that [the encyclical] may be shelved in the recesses of some dusty archive instead of becoming a prophetic clarion call to restore justice and freedom to the peoples who are working for their own betterment.”²² The document further applauded and encouraged lay individuals’ and groups’ mobilization in the temporal sphere, and chastised the region’s authoritarian regimes for characterizing all popular protest as communist machinations and not as the rejection of systemic inequality. The Santiago seminar was a prelude to the following year’s CELAM conference in Medellín, Colombia. The Medellín conference called together some 130 bishops from across Latin America to discuss the section’s theme, “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the [Second Vatican] Council.” The attendant bishops issued sixteen documents during the conference that encapsulated the Church’s doctrinal realignment. Among the documents produced were statements titled “Justice,” “Peace,” “Lay Movements,” and “Poverty of the Church.” The bishops also lauded “revolutionary” Christians, whom Berryman described as “those seeking radical change and who believed that the people should chart their own course—not as those using violence.”²³ Further, they called for Catholics to continue establishing base communities to engage with and mobilize the laity. Finally, their consistent use of “liberation” as a rhetorical device (first employed by theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez in an address at Chimbote, Peru just prior to CELAM II’s convocation) gave the movement its name—Liberation Theology.

Liberation Theology, State Backlash, and Foreign Policy

Liberation Theology had a profound effect on the Central American Churches, their relationships with the state, and the region’s diplomatic ties with the United States throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In Nicaragua, Liberationist ideology strained the Church’s relationship with the Somoza family. Following his elevation to Archbishop of Managua in 1970, Miguel Obando y Bravo refused to accept President Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s gift of a Mercedes-Benz automobile, sold it, and donated the proceeds to the poor. Obando y Bravo further distanced the Church from the Somoza regime by refusing to participate in public ceremonies with government officials and issued multiple pastoral letters that blamed the regime for Nicaragua’s worsening political and human rights crises. Elsewhere, Archbishop of San Salvador Luís Chávez y González and his successor, Blessed Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez, were El Salvador’s

most prominent human rights advocates, and they mobilized the country's laity and demanded sweeping agrarian reforms to one of Latin America's most inequitable economies. Romero's popularity was unprecedented among Catholic clergy: His weekly homilies were El Salvador's top-rated radio broadcast and aired throughout Central America's Northern Triangle. As historian Tommie Sue Montgomery has noted, Romero consistently related weekly scriptural readings to El Salvador's political and social crises and announced the names of *Salvadoreños* of all political persuasions that had been arrested, kidnapped, murdered, or tortured during the week.²⁴ Romero's masses drew hundreds to San Salvador's Metropolitan Cathedral each week and became a cultural touchstone for many Central Americans.

As Catholic leaders like Romero and Obando y Bravo led their Churches in a more politically active direction during this period, Central America's authoritarian regimes and far-right extremists condemned Liberationist priests, nuns, and lay missionaries as communists and launched a wave of anti-Catholic repression. In Guatemala, five priests serving the Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, and El Quiché dioceses were expelled from the country on charges of "intervening in politics" after they criticized Brigadier General Kjell Eugenio Laugerud García's fraudulent victory in the country's 1974 presidential election. Two years later, Guatemalan military forces murdered Father Bill Woods, a Maryknoll priest serving indigenous *campesinos* in the country's Ixcán region, shooting down his airplane shortly after it took off from Guatemala City's La Aurora airport. Woods was one of thirteen priests murdered in Guatemala between 1976 and 1983. In Nicaragua, members of the country's Estelí Diocese denounced the Somoza regime in a 1978 letter that detailed multiple instances of repression, including the attempted kidnapping of Fathers Teodoro Custer and Alfredo Gundrum, Monsignor José del Carmen Suazo's abduction, Father Eduardo Mejía's arrest, and multiple shootings outside a church in El Calvario.²⁵ Anti-Catholic violence was also rampant in El Salvador, where pro-government and far-right propaganda urged citizens to "Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest!" The country's extreme right and military forces also routinely terrorized San Salvador's Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana, murdered Fathers Rutillo Grande and Alfonso Navarro in 1977, assassinated Romero as he celebrated Mass in March 1980, and kidnapped, raped, and murdered Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and lay worker Jean Donovan in December of that year.

Central America's deepening repression and anti-Catholic violence had multiple implications for US foreign policy during the late 1970s and early 1980s. First, US-based religious groups like the US Catholic Conference (USCC) and National Council of Churches (NCC), as well as human rights NGOs like the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA, which had been founded by USCC and NCC leaders in 1974), demanded that the Carter administration halt arms sales and military assistance to governments that violated citizens' human rights. Sustained pressure on the administration and State Department resulted in the March 1977 announcement that US military assistance and sales would be contingent upon states' human rights records. However, Laugerud and Salvadoran President Arturo Armando Molina condemned the announcement as infringement on domestic sovereignty and refused any form of US military aid tied to human rights performance. Laugerud and his successor, General Fernando Romeo Lucas García, mitigated the loss of US military aid via alternative suppliers, and the country's brutal repression continued to worsen. This diplomatic impasse continued

throughout the decade and led Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to formally request Pope Saint John Paul II's assistance in resolving the crisis in 1980. The Pope had previously mediated a dispute between the Argentine and Chilean governments over claims to the Beagle Channel in 1978 and, Brzezinski hoped, would play a similar role for Central America. In a letter to the pontiff, Brzezinski wrote, "The people of Central America urgently need the wise intervention of Your Holiness to ensure that the Church plays the responsible and constructive role on behalf of moderation and peaceful change which only it can play."²⁶

Catholic and Protestant leaders also criticized the Reagan administration's desire to reinstate arms sales and consider direct intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1981, American Baptist Churches spokesman Reverend Robert W. Tiller referred to Central America's crises as "one of the great moral issues of our time" and noted that the country's National Guard routinely harassed and killed Protestant missionaries in addition to their Catholic counterparts.²⁷ Similarly, Maryknoll Mission Sister Melinda Roper explicitly blamed existing US policy toward Central America for the murders of Clarke, Ford, Kazel, and Donovan, stating, "I believe that the deaths of the four women cannot be separated from the deaths of thousands of innocent Salvadorans. Nor do I believe the deaths can be separated from US policy toward that Government."²⁸ Washington, DC Archbishop James Hickey also testified before the committee, and stated that he was "profoundly disappointed" in the Reagan administration's support for Roberto d'Aubuisson Arrieta's ultra-rightist ARENA party in El Salvador and implored policymakers to instead "recognize that the primary issue in El Salvador is the domestic, political, and economic structure of the country—not the role of the Soviet Union or Cuba in Central America."²⁹

Reagan administration officials were also forced to address evangelical Protestants' increasingly prominent voice in foreign policy debates. Leading evangelical ministers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson used the rapidly expanding medium of cable television to warn millions of Americans about the political and spiritual threats posed by abortion, moral degeneracy, and communism via programming like Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour* and Robertson's *700 Club*. Their unabashed "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-America" platform was a cornerstone of US neo-conservatism and, by the early 1980s, had helped make evangelical Protestantism the fastest growing and most influential Christian sect in the United States. As political scientist and historian Lars Schoultz has noted, Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network was among the largest donors to Nicaragua's US-backed Contra forces via Operation Blessing. Further, Robertson, who referred to the Contras as "God's army," publicly exhorted anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans to form a government in exile that would eventually overthrow President Daniel Ortega Saavedra.³⁰ Falwell also praised the Contras and US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North for his role in the Iran-Contra Scandal, in which administration officials oversaw the illegal sale of weapons to Iran to fund Contra forces. During Falwell's commencement address at his Liberty University in 1988, for example, the televangelist lauded North as "a true American hero" and claimed that, like North, Jesus Christ had also been "indicted and convicted and crucified" for his actions.³¹ Evangelical Protestantism was similarly prosperous in Guatemala, where numerous groups like Gospel Outreach had played a major role in relief efforts following that country's disastrous earthquake in 1976. Evangelicals' presence in post-quake Guatemala

also precipitated a profound demographic shift: as historian Lauren Turek has noted, Guatemala's evangelical population tripled between 1976 and 1982, and nearly a quarter of Guatemalans were members of Protestant churches by the end of this period.³²

Brigadier General José Efraín Ríos Montt was one of Guatemala's most notable evangelical converts. A fervent neo-Pentecostal and member of *El Verbo* Ministries, Ríos Montt exhibited theocratic tendencies immediately after assuming the presidency in March 1982. During a meeting with US Ambassador to Guatemala Frederic Chapin on April 8 of that year, Ríos Montt proclaimed that God had destined him to rule the country, and delivered weekly sermons, known as *discursos*, on national television every Sunday evening. During his sixteen-month regime, the Guatemalan military and civil defense forces committed hundreds of atrocities, including massacres in villages like Xalbal, Acul Quiché, San Antonio Sinaché, and in the Ixíl Triangle region that drew worldwide condemnation from religious and secular media, human rights NGOs, and foreign governments. By late 1982, the regime's violence had made it an international pariah and forced US officials to distance the Reagan administration from Ríos Montt. Prior to attending a three-day retreat in Hot Springs, Virginia (home of Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, which had hosted telethons for Ríos Montt and Nicaragua's Contras) in October, Ríos Montt requested a meeting with Reagan at the White House as part of an official state visit. National Security Council officials rejected the idea, noting that "it would be a mistake for President Reagan to receive Ríos Montt at this time [because] . . . the President's prestige could be damaged. However low profile a meeting, it will receive publicity—probably adverse."³³ Reagan also avoided visiting Guatemala during his visit to Latin America in December of that year and held a "working meeting" with Ríos Montt at San Pedro Sula, Honduras's La Mesa Airport instead. Following the meeting, Reagan told reporters that Guatemala had "some very real problems" and that, in his opinion, Ríos Montt had "been getting a bum rap" in the international press.³⁴

Human rights activists and members of the Catholic clergy derided Reagan's meeting with Ríos Montt and praise for the dictator. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs called Reagan's decision to meet with Ríos Montt "shameful" and noted that Guatemala's armed forces had killed over four thousand citizens between March and December 1982. Additionally, Monsignor Charles Owens Rice remarked in his *Pittsburgh Catholic* column that "one wonders that even an obtuse and heartless man such as President Reagan can talk as he did about . . . Ríos Montt as having a bum rap. His isolation from reality was not disturbed by his recent swing through parts of Latin America in which he only talked to oppressors."³⁵ Rice punctuated his comments with a recollection of a mass he had attended in the colonial capital of Antigua Guatemala in 1974 and wondered if the "truckload after truckload of Indians and peasants" in attendance that day were still alive.

The Slow March to Peace

As religious and secular activists in the United States excoriated the Reagan administration's Central American policies, Church-state relations in the region began a slow, foundational transformation in 1983. During John Paul II's pastoral visit to Central America in March of that year, the Holy Father addressed the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in San José, Costa

Rica and told the assembled judges that he endorsed the Court's legal mission, encouraged people and states within the Court's jurisdiction to seek its remedy in human rights disputes, and said states and transnational bodies needed "effective instruments . . . and, where necessary, appropriate sanctions" to enforce human rights laws and covenants.³⁶ The pontiff experienced a hostile reaction in Nicaragua the following day when he was heckled by pro-Sandinista spectators at a public mass in Managua, prompting him to demand silence during his remarks. US Embassy officials in Managua reported that the incident galvanized the Nicaraguan Church and support for Obando y Bravo, who had emerged as one of the country's most prominent critics of the Sandinista government. In a hastily written statement on March 8, the FSLN National Directorate "expressed the hope that the Pope, on his return to the Vatican, would . . . take into account the calls for peace he heard from the people in Nicaragua."³⁷ The Pope also visited El Salvador during his journey, where he proclaimed, "I see in this crowd and all of Central America [the] immense desire for reconciliation and peace," and Guatemala, where he challenged the Ríos Montt regime to enact legislation to offer stronger human rights protection for the country's indigenous majority and instructed those in attendance to "organize associations for the defense of your rights."³⁸

The Pope's visit seemed to animate the region, as its religious and political leaders slowly began to negotiate the frameworks that would ultimately end the civil wars. In July 1983, Rodrigo Jiménez, representing El Salvador's FMLN, asked Archbishop José Sebastián Laboa Gallego, the Apostolic Nuncio to Panama, to be present at a meeting with Special Envoy to Central America Ambassador-at-Large Richard Stone that, if successful, would facilitate additional talks between the United States and FMLN. In January 1984, the US Embassy in Guatemala City reported that "the Catholic Church in Guatemala [was] generally well disposed toward the efforts the Mejía government [was] making to improve relations" between the two institutions.³⁹ Embassy officials were cautiously optimistic that Guatemalan President General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores's "vigorous courting" of the Church and insistence that free National Assembly elections would take place during 1984 were signs that Guatemala's political and social conditions were slowly improving. Almost two million Guatemalans voted on July 1, 1984, with the country's Church-backed Christian Democratic Party winning nearly a quarter of the National Assembly's seats and dominating municipal elections, winning 142 of 322 contests. In Nicaragua, Obando y Bravo and the CEN issued a pastoral letter on Easter Sunday 1984 that lamented the country's continued political violence and human rights violations, chastised Nicaraguan priests who collaborated with the Ortega government, and criticized the Reagan administration's support for Contra counterinsurgents. The bishops also demanded the Ortega government engage in dialogue with Contra forces that would "seek appropriate solutions to the anguish, pain, exhaustion, and fatigue of the many, many people who long for peace [and] the many, many people who want to live . . . in a climate of democratic harmony."⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Romero's successor as Archbishop of San Salvador, Arturo Rivera y Damas, capitalized on his friendship with newly elected President (and Christian Democratic party leader) José Napoleón Durate to act as an envoy between the Duarte government and the country's far left FMLN and FDN forces. As religious historian Emelio Betances has noted, "thanks to those connections, Rivera y Damas was able to transmit messages to both sides of the conflict and eventually organize important meetings to negotiate a solution to the civil war."⁴¹

Protracted negotiations between Central American governments and rebel groups, often mediated by religious officials, during the late 1980s would ultimately prove successful. In August 1987, the region's five presidents created a framework at Esquipulas, Guatemala for ending Central America's civil wars. The agreement, known as the Esquipulas II Accords, pledged dialogue between governments and opposition groups, established timetables for free and fair elections, terminated cross-border support for insurgent forces, and called for action to resolve the region's refugee crises. Esquipulas II also mandated national reconciliation commissions that included representatives from the Catholic Church and an "eminent citizen" unaffiliated with either the Church or government. Nicaragua's commission, which included Obando y Bravo, successfully negotiated the Contras' demobilization and endorsed the country's 1990 presidential elections, in which Violeta Chamorro defeated Ortega. In El Salvador, the country's Catholic hierarchy and UN representatives served as observers to peace talks between that country's government and FMLN forces. The talks produced the Treaty of Chapultepec, which formally ended thirteen years of civil war in January 1992. Finally, Bishop Rodolfo Quezada Toruño served on Guatemala's national reconciliation commission, led the country's Assembly of Civil Society, and played a critical role in negotiating the Oslo Accords that formally ended the country's civil war in December 1996.

Discussion of the Literature

This article draws primarily from two large bodies of literature. The first is the wealth of scholarship focused on US-Central American relations. As diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber noted in his foundational work *Inevitable Revolutions*, scholars produced over seven hundred works on the topic during the 1980s alone.⁴² Many of these titles, including Lester Langley's *The Banana Wars*, Morris Blachman, William Leogrande, and Kenneth Sharp's *Confronting Revolution*, and Piero Gleijeses's *Shattered Hope*, framed the United States' profound economic, military, and political influence over the region in hegemonic and imperialist terms.⁴³ This field experienced a critical historiographic shift in the 1990s and early 2000s, when scholars ascribed greater agency to Central and Latin American dictators when examining their relationships with US policymakers. The resultant scholarship, as diplomatic historian Max Paul Friedman famously noted, "retired the puppets," and works like Eric Roorda's *The Dictator Next Door* and Lauren Derby's *The Dictator's Seduction* highlighted the numerous ways that Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo exploited US foreign policy for his own political and personal gain.⁴⁴ Finally, more recent scholarship on US-Central American relations has placed increasing emphasis on how non-state actors have informed diplomatic ties. Friedman's analysis of the coffee industry's influence on US-Guatemalan relations during World War II, alongside studies by Cindy Forster, Steve Striffler, John Soluri, and Jason Colby on United Fruit Company's notorious stranglehold on the region, provide crucial insight into how global commerce and multinational corporations helped shape US foreign policy toward Central America.⁴⁵

Scholars of US-Central American relations must also account for religion's influence on policymaking during the Cold War. Diplomatic, political, and religious scholars have produced a rich body of literature devoted to Liberation Theology's underpinnings and historical

consequences for Central America and its relationship with the United States. Leonardo Boff's *Jesus Christ Liberator*, Philip Berryman's *The Religious Roots of Rebellion*, and Edward Cleary's *Crisis and Change* are among the early, foundational studies of the topic.⁴⁶ Relatedly, Manzar Foroohar, John Kirk, and Tommie Sue Montgomery have explored how Catholicism and Catholic activism shaped domestic politics in Nicaragua and El Salvador during those countries' civil wars.⁴⁷ Finally, more recent works like Timothy Byrnes's *Reverse Mission* have examined liberationist activism and policymakers' responses in a transnational context.⁴⁸

Scholars have also devoted considerable attention to Protestant influences on US policymaking and relations with Central America. David Martin's *Tongues of Fire* and David Stoll's *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* were among the first major scholarly analyses of Protestantism's growth in the region and remain indispensable titles in the field.⁴⁹ More recent scholarship from Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier, Eric Patterson, Daniel Salinas, and Todd Hartch has provided comprehensive analyses of evangelical Protestantism's prodigious growth in Latin America.⁵⁰ Virginia Garrard-Burnett's *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem and Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit* examine Protestant influence in Guatemala and how Ríos Montt's Pentecostalism shaped his murderous dictatorship.⁵¹ Relatedly, Lauren Turek has examined how US-based missionaries helped precipitate Ríos Montt's evangelical fervor during the late 1970s. Calvin L. Smith's *Revolution, Revival, and Religious Conflict in Sandinista Nicaragua* explored the Ortega government's complicated relationship with Protestantism, while Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy have drawn ideological connections between the Protestant Reformation and Nicaragua's political upheaval.⁵²

The literature will continue to expand in multiple directions in the future. One of the most important of these will be increased focus on the Reagan administration's policy approach to Central America. As greater amounts of administrative and State Department records are declassified in the coming years, scholars will be able to provide a more comprehensive account of US-Central American relations during the Cold War's final decade. Another key development will be increased focus on the influence of human rights NGOs on foreign policymaking. As the broader field of diplomatic historiography has taken greater notice of non-state actors, scholarship from Barbara Keys, Sarah Snyder, Daniel Sargent, and William Michael Schmidli, among others, has shown the important role that human rights activists played in foreign policy formation during the 1970s and 1980s.⁵³ Framing Catholic- and Protestant-affiliated groups and missionaries as human rights activists and integrating them into the literature will enrich the field in the future.

Primary Sources

Three types of primary sources guide the field's scholarship. A broad array of US-based archives, libraries, and published volumes provide invaluable material for scholars. Among archives, any comprehensive study of Cold War-era US foreign policy must include materials from presidential libraries. This chapter builds upon documents from the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries in Atlanta, Georgia and Simi Valley, California, respectively. These libraries' collections will become even more important as additional documents are declassified and made available to researchers in the near future. The National Archives at College Park, Maryland and George Washington

University's National Security Archives in Washington, DC are two valuable repositories. Likewise, the CIA and State Department's FOIA electronic reading rooms offer a trove of declassified material to researchers. With respect to Central America, Swarthmore College's Peace Collection contains a wide variety of documents from groups like WOLA and the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy. Finally, the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series compiles major documents related to foreign policymaking decisions and is a cornerstone of the scholarship.

Central American archives provide similarly important resources. The Instituto Nicaragüense de Cultura in Managua, Nicaragua is the country's principal historical archive. San Salvador's Archivo General de la Nación offers extensive archival material for researchers interested in Salvadoran history, while Antigua Guatemala's Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) includes extensive holdings related to Guatemalan religion, politics, and society. In Guatemala City, the Archivo Historico de la Policía Nacional contains documentation related to the National Police's surveillance and arrests of Guatemalan citizens during the war.

Finally, religious archives offer researchers important materials. The Maryknoll Mission Archives include diaries and letters from missionaries serving in Central America, while Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Presbyterian Historical Society holds a significant collection of material from the National Council of Churches. Individual parishes and dioceses throughout the United States and Central America are also rich sources of material for scholars interested in specific priests or nuns. Additionally, published memoirs like Ita Ford's *Here I Am, Lord*, Bernice Kita's *What Prize Awaits Us*, Marjorie and Thomas Melville's *Whose Heaven, Whose Earth?*, and Judith Noone's *The Same Fate as the Poor* have provided invaluable, firsthand insights on missionaries' experiences in Central America.

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Notes

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2. Foroohar, *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua*, 24.
3. Bruce Johnson Calder, *Crecimiento y Cambio de la Iglesia Católica Guatemalteca, 1944–1966* (Guatemala: Seminario de Integración Social Guatemaltecas, Ministerio de Educación, 1970), 19.
4. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Guatemala*, ed. Susan Holly and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2003), Document 132.

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8. Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes, Apostolic Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church*, December 7, 1965, sec. 24.
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11. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, secs. 147, 192.
12. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris, Encyclical Letter on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty*, April 11, 1963, secs. 11–27.
13. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, sec. 80.
14. Leo XIII, *Custodi de Quella Fede, Encyclical Letter on Freemasonry*, December 8, 1892; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno, Encyclical Letter on Reconstruction of the Social Order*, March 19, 1937, *Divini Redemptoris, Encyclical Letter on Atheistic Communism*, March 19, 1937.
15. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, sec. 158.
16. Paul VI, "Messaggio di Paolo VI all'intera famiglia umana," June 22, 1963.
17. Paul VI, "Messaggio di Paolo VI all'intera famiglia umana."
18. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, December 7, 1965, sec. 29.
19. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, sec. 88.
20. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio, Encyclical Letter on the Development of Peoples*, March 26, 1967, sec. 1.
21. The countries were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.
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23. Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, 59.
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