



# Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

## U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives in Central America 1977-1989: Underlying Objectives in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador

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**U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives in Central America 1977-1989: Underlying Objectives in  
Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador**

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Honors Thesis

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# **U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives in Central America 1977-1989: Underlying Objectives in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador**

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this thesis is to test the hypothesis that foreign policy objectives result from incentives and pressures created by the international theater at large. These objectives evolve due to changes in historical context and occasional paradigm shifts in international relations. So, foreign policy objectives exist largely independent from any individual leader and rather emerge from adaptations forced upon states by circumstance. The project is a qualitative structured comparison between Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador during the Carter and Reagan years. It concludes that there is strong evidence to support the hypothesis and secondary claim.

Keywords: Carter, Reagan, Central America, and U.S. Foreign Policy.

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## **Introductory Statement**

American foreign policy towards the Central American region under both Presidents Carter and Reagan was born out of two veins of U.S. history that crossed paths at the same moment in time. The first had existed since the early days of the state, Latin American foreign policy. The second was the new defining vein of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, containment. To understand the foreign policy of these two administrations one must first examine each vein individually and then observe which elements of each appear in the policies of Carter and Reagan. By analyzing how the United States acted under these two administrations in the cases of Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador one can discern a lot about what motivates the United States. Significant is to determine the role or potentially lack thereof presidential personality plays in defining U.S. foreign policy objectives.

## **Defining the Objective**

The goal of this thesis is to test the hypothesis that foreign policy objectives result from incentives and pressures created by the international theater at large. These objectives evolve due to changes in historical context and occasional paradigm shifts in international relations. So, foreign policy objectives exist largely independent from any individual leader and rather emerge from adaptations forced upon states by circumstance.

## **Preliminary Argument**

My preliminary research suggests that there is good evidence that foreign policy objectives result from incentives and pressures created by the international theater as opposed to the personality of an individual leader. This research has been done on U.S. foreign policy in Nicaragua,

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Guatemala, and El Salvador during the Carter and Reagan presidencies. What is significant in these cases is that some of the presidential personalities stated goals contrast. Moreover, the Carter administration expressly set out to change foreign policy objectives. So, consistency that exists across these two administrations suggest that presidential personality was not the central motivator of U.S. foreign policy.

### **Structure**

This paper will first briefly review some of the relevant literature. Then, it will explore the starting point of U.S. foreign policy objectives in Latin America and the Cold War. This exploration will be used as a reference point in the conclusion to determine the merit of the secondary claim being made surrounding the evolution of U.S. foreign policy objectives. Next, a structured comparison will be made between the cases of Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Then, the reader will be left with some additional considerations. Lastly, conclusions will be drawn, and the implications of this thesis paper will be reviewed.

### **Literature review**

Much scholarship already exists on the international system and its effects on the motivation of states. One scholar of note is Kenneth Waltz. He is a neo-realist whose work *Theory of International Politics* did much to advance the realist perspective. This particular brand of realism holds the variable of power to be the most salient determiner of state action. Scarcity in an anarchical system drives state action and the potential routes of that state are determined by its relative power (Waltz, 1979).

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Relevant especially to Latin American politics is the work of Fernando Cardoso. In his influential book *Dependency and Development* he characterizes the relationship between periphery Latin American states and the hegemonic U.S. state as being dominated by a holy alliance between the periphery's elites and the hegemon's business class (Cardoso, 1979). This work is not an all-encompassing theory of international relations like that of Waltz. It is however a salient argument that economics is the principle driving force in relations between the United States and Latin America.

An interesting scholar often put into the dependist camp is Noam Chomsky. His book *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* is both a harsh critique of U.S. policy and an effort to make a claim on its motivations. Whereas Cardoso describes the relationship between the United States and Latin American states, Chomsky delves deep into what U.S. action was taken, why, and writes in graphic detail of its effects on the ground. His claim on the motivation of U.S. policy is a nuanced one having to do with the domestic political system, economics, and the inner workings of administrations. Essentially, the central idea is that the democratic-capitalist system motivates U.S. policy (Chomsky, 2015).

Also relevant is a quantitative study that exists on how human rights affect the distribution of U.S. aid abroad. *United States Human Rights Policy and Foreign Assistance* by Clair Apodaca and Michael Stohl found that the human rights record of a regime receiving aid only affected economic aid. Military aid was not impacted (Apodaca, 1999).

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## **The origin of U.S. foreign policy objectives in Latin America**

American objectives in Latin America in the early days of our nation had more to do with Europe than to do with Latin America. The United States sought to keep Europe from gaining strength in the region under the assumption that one day the United States would grow powerful enough to colonize and/or annex what it wanted. Moreover, Europeans in the Holy Alliance<sup>1</sup> of 1818 were explicitly united against democracy in an effort to preserve monarchies. The alliance was in direct response to the French revolution and subsequent rise of Napoleon. It had reinstalled monarchies in both Spain and Italy. Significant too is that Latin America had only just freed itself of colonialism<sup>2</sup> and was covered with nascent democracies (Bailey, 1974, 177-190).

Out of the situation two variables are of note. Firstly, the United States had a small, yet existent, security concern in the Holy Alliance. Secondly, U.S. clearly perceived a future opportunity for expansion of influence southwards.

The famous Monroe Doctrine was tucked into a state of the union address on December 2, 1823 in response to the situation. It states that "...as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers (Monroe, 1823)." Unknown to Monroe at the time the British had already moved, and the French were made to publicly declare to leave Spanish America be. Additionally, its impact was purely rhetorical and without the support of the British

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<sup>1</sup> Russia, Austria, Prussia, England, and later France.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1808 and 1826 depending on the country



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the U.S. would not have been able to stand against a European power. However, this reality almost made a dictum the only plausible action (Bailey, 1974, 177-190).

This dictum is the earliest form of U.S.-Latin American policy and although it was directed at Europe, it began a policy trend towards Latin America that would continue through the 1970s and 80s. The trend reveals itself in the alternative possibility that the Monroe Doctrine rejected. It had been suggested by a British diplomat, George Canning, that the United States and Great Britain issue a joint manifesto against European intervention in the Americas. The agreement was declined largely due to the influence of Secretary of State Adams. He was wary of an agreement that might prevent the U.S. from itself expanding into Latin America (Bailey, 1974, 177-190).

So, the original policy on which the United States would base the rest of its Latin American policy on reflects an American desire exert its control over Latin America territorially and to a lesser degree politically.

### **The origin of U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Cold War era**

The Cold War era began at a time and perhaps in response to two radical changes to the international theater. Firstly, technologically humanity achieved such awesomely destructive weapons that a new calculation was introduced to the world stage. This was a permanent change that continues to affect the calculus of states today. Secondly, there was a power shift in the world. Power spilled out of western Europe and into the opposing forces of Moscow and Washington D.C. Although the Cold War is thought to have started after WWII, the success of

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the Russian Revolution sparked the conflict and created the situation in which new American foreign policy objectives arose (Gaddis, 2007).

These dramatic changes should be thought of as constituting a new world order because of two fundamental shifts in the international theater. For the first time in history the utilization of a weapon could potentially present an existential threat to humanity.<sup>3</sup> Also, the polarity of the world drastically shifted from a multi-polar world dominated by western Europe to a bi-polar world dominated by the United States and the USSR.

Helpful to those studying Cold War objectives is that there exists a document on which U.S. Cold War policy was based, George Kennan's long telegram. Kennan lays out the underlying motivations of the Soviet government as he sees them and how those motivations make the USSR a natural and outright enemy to the United States. Kennan wrote of the USSR, "In summary, we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent modus vivendi that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure ("George Kennan's...,1946)." The most prominent irreconcilable difference between the two states is the ideological difference between them. Further, there existed a power vacuum that pitted the two states against one another geopolitically ("George Kennan's..., 1946).

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, at the dawn of the Cold War it was not universally accepted that nuclear weapons would be categorically different than others. However, after Japan no state used the weapons and by the Eisenhower administration at the latest the categorical difference had become clear.

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How the containment policy prescribed by Kennan was enacted by Truman demonstrates how these new objectives created by the new world order solidified. The communists of North Korea, China, and the USSR were collaborating at the time and Moscow specifically made a miscalculation. Those in Moscow did not believe that the United States would move to military defend Korea (Gaddis, 2007). So, Truman's swift movement to do so and the ensuing support of congress reflects the degree to which the newly emerged foreign policy objectives laid out by Kennan had solidified to become foundational to how the United States would act in the new world order.

Significant is the language used by Truman while leading the United States into action in Korea. The declaration was noticeably multilateral ("Statement by..., 1950). The United States had not been part of a peacetime military alliance since its alliance with France in the 1800s to affirm American independence (Gaddis, 2007). So, the turn to multilateralism in fact bucked the trend in U.S. foreign policy up until that point. It emphasizes the character of the new world order created by the fall of Western Europe. Two systems had emerged and for the United States to defend its interest internationally its preferred system required active maintenance.

Korea cemented a trend that would continue throughout the Cold War. The United States was willing to fight a ground war to prevent the spread of communism. Moreover, the global communist movement was shown, as Kennan had suggested, to be at least in some capacity managed by Moscow. So, while this case would not have provided evidence that in all cases Moscow was behind communist movements, it certainly demonstrated Soviet involvement was a real possibility (Gaddis, 2007).

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The new foreign policy objective born out of the new world order was in essence a security objective. Prevent the USSR from garnering more power by preventing the increase in its potential satellites. I.e. prevent the spread of communism.

### **Case 1: Nicaragua**

American policy in Nicaragua before 1977 can be summed up in a quote about Anastasio Somoza that is attributed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “He may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).”

When Carter took office, he was met with a Nicaraguan state dominated by the Somoza-elite alliance. Somoza had received U.S. support in exchange for defending U.S. economic and political interests. Notably, the power that enabled the Somozas to rule was projected through the National Guard. The origin of this National Guard was American policy in the Great Depression Era (Isbester, 2011, 157-181). The National Guard can be thought of as a tool forged by Americans and handed to the Somozas to maintain political control of the Nicaraguan state.

Important to understand are some of the internal dynamics and trends that existed below the level of general political control when Carter took office. The agricultural sector dominated the Nicaraguan economy. Most of the fertile land was used by large scaled farms owned by the elites. In the 1960s Nicaragua in conjunction with the Alliance For Progress<sup>4</sup> executed import substitution industrialization policies meant to begin industrializing the country. Some economic gains were made, and the manufacturing sector began to form. However, due to inflation in the early 1970s, much of these economic gains were lost and the ISI policies appear to have failed.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. program meant to foster economic growth and reduce social unrest.

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Moreover, structural economic factors contributed to further impoverishment of the poor in the 1970s (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

Significant is that the Somoza family used its position to edge the elites out of their economic domination and the family would come to own a significant share of the private sector. Also, the FSNL or Sandinistas had formed in the early 1960s. It was an armed group of insurgents inspired by both the historical figure Augusto Sandino<sup>5</sup> and the Cuban Revolution (Isbester, 2011, 157-181). Thus, Carter began his administration's U.S.-Nicaraguan relations with a state ruled by a weakened Somoza-elite alliance that faced an armed insurrection.

Carter when taking office openly set out to reshape and redefine U.S. foreign policy. In his inauguration address he said,

“I would hope that the nations of the world might say that we had built a lasting peace, based not on weapons of war but on international policies which reflect our own most precious values. These are not just my goals, and they will not be my accomplishments, but the affirmation of our nation's continuing moral strength and our belief in an undiminished, ever-expanding American dream (Carter, 1977).”

This rhetoric accompanied by his legislative agenda meant to reduce human rights abuses by dictators, many of whom the United States itself installed, have made his name synonymous with human rights in the mind of the American public.

In the case of Nicaragua, the Carter administration's rhetoric would not become concrete policy until 1978 when Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, a political opponent of the Somozas, was assassinated (Katovich, 1993). By 1978 there was no ambiguity surrounding the category of human rights abuses occurring in Nicaragua. In 1976 Edelberto Torres, a Nicaraguan historian living in exile,

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<sup>5</sup> Leader of early revolutionary movement in Nicaragua

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had testified before congress that the regime was responsible for rape, castration, and various forms of torture. Notably, both an arms credit agreement and significant economic aid was nevertheless approved for Nicaragua for the fiscal year 1978 (Katovich, 1993).

In June of 1978, Somoza made a public pledge to improve human rights in Nicaragua (Katovich, 1993). To encourage the regime to make good on such promises in July of that year President Carter sent a congratulatory letter to Somoza. Moreover, in 1978 the administration in its budget proposal for the fiscal year 1979 requested \$150,000 for a military training grant to give to the Nicaraguan national guard. These both occurred while the regime continued to commit abuses through the national guard (Goshko, 1978).

In October of 1978 the Carter administration in conjunction with the Organization of American States (OAS) attempted to mediate an agreement between the Sandinistas and the regime.

However, those talks collapsed by January of 1979. Notably, the proposal put forth by the OAS<sup>6</sup> did not allow for the possibility of a Sandinista interim government. This at a minimum suggests that the Carter administration was hesitant to endorse a leftist group for a government (Katovich, 1993).

In June of 1979, the Sandinistas launched a major offensive against the Somoza regime. In that same month, an ABC news reporter was shot and killed by the Nicaraguan national guard. The footage aired worldwide (Katovich, 1993).

In response to the coming fall of the regime the Carter administration proposed to the OAS a solution that would allow for an interim non-Sandinista government. The proposal was rejected

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<sup>6</sup> Of which the United States is a member

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(Katovich, 1993). In July of 1979, the possibility of an interim government would end. Somoza fled the country and the national guardsmen abandoned their posts (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

The results of this civil war were devastating to Nicaragua. Somoza left \$1.6 billion in debt, the fighting had caused over \$400 million in property damages, and 20% of the people were homeless (Isbester, 2011, 157-181). The country then came to be governed by a national directorate whose members each represented a different faction of the FSLN (Frente Sandista de Liberación Nacional). The Sandinistas did initially receive some support from the Carter administration (Isbester, 2011, 157-181), however that support was quickly rebuked due to Sandinista ties to El Salvadorian leftist insurgents.

The Reagan administration came to power in the United State in 1981. Reagan's take on foreign policy was markedly different to that of the Carter administration. Reagan advocated a strengthening of the military and sought to push back what he thought of as Soviet influence across the globe. To do so, the administration sought the use of proxies on the ground that were already fighting and/or open to taking on perceived or actual communist regimes (Pach, 2006).

In Nicaragua, this would take the form of the Contras. After coming into office his administration quickly supplied the CIA with \$20 million to train a group that would come to be known as the Contras in Honduras. The Contras were made up of former Somoza national guard members and other mercenaries. The group described itself as counterrevolutionary and used terrorism to deter Nicaraguans from cooperating with the new government. The Contras commanded about 15,000 soldiers at its height (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

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Putting aside whether the Sandinistas were communists and/or a Soviet satellite, the Contras while unable to gain a foothold in Nicaragua did significantly harm the new government. By 1982 half of the Nicaraguan budget went to fighting the Contras. Moreover, the new government lost popular support and began to face mounting international pressure to hold an election (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

Reagan's strategy to oust the Sandinistas was not limited to funding the Contras. The administration also sought the moral high ground via a war of information against the Sandinistas. It charged them with genocide, drug trade involvement, terrorism and more. Granted, many of the claims were without evidence. In fact, the abuses of the Contras far outweigh the abuses of the Sandinistas.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the Reagan administration's rhetoric was a tool leveraged to disparage the Sandinista reputation worldwide (Chomsky, 2015, 106).

The Sandinistas, due to domestic and international pressure, called for an election in 1984. Rightwing parties backed by the United States largely did not participate. The FSNL won. The Reagan administration decried the election as fraudulent. Although, notably governments elsewhere disagreed. The turnout was over 70% and over 90% of those eligible to vote registered to do so (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

Public support for the Contras waned and so the Congress explicitly forbade further monetary support of the group. Notoriously, the Reagan administration continued to support the Contras. It used the \$40 million that it received from an arms deal with Iran to fund the group (Matthews, 2017). This war cost Nicaragua more and more over time. In addition to the national budget

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<sup>7</sup> That's not to say that the Sandinistas did not commit human rights abuses rather that the amount committed was comparatively small.



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mentioned above, some \$50 million in damage to economic infrastructure was caused annually by the conflict. Only a year after Reagan left office the Sandinistas lost at the ballot box largely due to U.S. influence (Isbester, 2011, 157-181).

U.S. objectives that seem most apparent in this case are undermine the Sandinistas, defend/establish a US friendly government, and maintain the capitalist economy. Both presidents demonstrated a desire to exert political control over the state. Carter sought to force the state to enforce human rights and avoid a Sandinista takeover. Reagan attempted to thwart the control of the Sandinistas.

Carter, despite opening disliking Somoza, demonstrated an attempt to prevent the loss of U.S. political control through his administration's budget proposal for 1979, the proposals to the OAS that excluded the possibility of Sandinista governance, and perhaps most of all the letter he sent to Somoza congratulating him on his human rights pledges. The letter is significant because it demonstrated Carter's preference to work within the existing framework of a U.S.-regime alliance over the alternative of forcing a democratic and therefore unpredictable outcome. Carter made apparent that his administration supported Somoza, begrudgingly or not, over the Sandinistas despite Carter's open opposition to Somoza's human rights record.

Reagan demonstrated an attempt at political control through his administration's continued and unwavering support of the Contras, even in the face of a Congressional order not to do so, and a war of information against the Sandinistas. Of note is the administration's continued denouncement of the Sandinistas even after they won an election. This strongly suggests that what the Reagan administration valued was not democracy but rather a pro-U.S. government.

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So, the actions of both presidents both propagate the same basic goals. That is not to say that neither presidential personalities had a strong impact on US foreign policy objectives. Rather, that the fundamental goal was established by the historical situation and existing goals the presidents were presented with. The U.S., being the hegemon of the region, had been consistently motivated to exert political controls on the smaller states around it for years.

Important is that there was some shift in U.S. value on political control. The United States had the capacity to forcibly install a new regime as it had done in the past. However, neither the Carter nor Reagan administration decided to do so. This suggests that unlike previous administrations in the era of Reagan and Carter intervention had either been removed from the realm of possibilities or deemed too great a cost to ceding political control.

The above finding that presidential personality was unable to affect the underlying goals of the United States state is strong. Carter specifically set out to change how the United States operated. Indeed, he was able to mitigate the goals established and sought after by previous administrations. This is evident in the decision not to intervene on behalf of Somoza.<sup>8</sup> However, the circumstance that he inherited did not permit him to abandon the struggle against the Sandinistas, the defense of a U.S. friendly government, nor the maintenance of a capitalist Nicaragua. The Reagan administration openly and relentlessly sought increased U.S. political control of the state. So, in his case his personality intentionally or not was largely in line with existing objectives. Thus, he did little to affect them.

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that even under a more hawkish administration this may have not been politically possible because of the murder of an ABC reporter at the hands of the Somoza regime.

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## **Case 2: Guatemala**

In June of 1954 Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas invaded Guatemala from Honduras. His private army was funded and supported by the CIA. The Guatemalan National Guard did not defend the government and so the democratically elected president, President Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, resigned (Isbester, 2011, 131-155).

This invasion is exemplative of a generally unilateral and interventionist track record in Guatemala before Carter. In fact, it was in Guatemala that the United States trained the troops that it used in the now infamous Bay of Pigs Invasion. There were several coups between the time of Armas and the election of Carter. These coups were due to largely internal factors and so, the United States seemingly was uninterested in the individual coups (Isbester, 2011, 131-155). Instead, administration after administration simply supported each subsequent leader as the underlying relationship did not seem to change across different Guatemalan regimes.

Guatemala was of unique economic importance to the US, especially in the time of Carter. Firstly, over 100 U.S. corporations operated in Guatemala. Notably, 31 of these were Fortune top 100 companies. Secondly, Guatemala has deposits of nickel and oil. Both are required for modern industry and in the 1970s reliable sources of oil was top of mind for U.S. policy makers. Thirdly, the private sector had already invested great sums of money into developing raw material extraction in Guatemala. So, while not existential, there existed potential risk to important American economic entities (Rojas).

The agenda Carter brought to Guatemala was in essence the same one described in Nicaragua. He sought to set human rights as a fundamental tenet of U.S.-Guatemalan policy. It was quickly

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made clear that an agenda focusing on human rights was not going to be endorsed by his contemporaries in the Guatemalan government. In April of 1977, the Guatemalan minister of foreign relations characterized the U.S. report on human rights in Guatemala as an intervention into Guatemalan affairs and a breach of sovereignty. Moreover, Guatemala rejected US military support (Castañeda, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

An important actor to bring into the discussion here is Israel. In 1977 Israel became the largest supplier of arms to Guatemala. Later, the infamous Guatemalan general Héctor Mario López<sup>10</sup> would describe Israel as Guatemala's number one friend. Moreover, in 1981 the United States began to fund the purchase of Israeli arms by periphery states (Castañeda, 2007). Further, during the Carter years Guatemala continued to receive U.S. military support. While true *new* arms deals could not be made with Guatemala, deals already authorized continued the flow of arms southward through 1980 (White, 1984, 104).

So, the Carter administration seemingly changed the relationship rhetorically while substantively allowing it to continue mostly unchanged. That is not to say that the administration did not in good faith attempt to transform U.S. policy rather than the material support of the United States and its ally Israel continued to bolster the Guatemalan military in spite of the surface level changes made. In fact, arms support from the U.S. did not dip much below the norm in the Carter era due to the shipments that had been already authorized (Chomsky, 2015, 47).

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<sup>9</sup> Despite this, the government did try to acquire some military equipment at the end of 1978. The attempted purchase was denied. Further, the support being rejected was the same to be denied to Guatemala due to human rights concerns. I.e. it was not going to be sent in any event. Moreover, it did not impact already approved support.

<sup>10</sup> He would come to be found guilty of many crimes against the Mayan people while working under Montt

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After the election of Reagan, direct military aid to Guatemala was restarted. Reagan was able to get around the human rights legislation of the 1970s by claiming that Ríos Montt, the dictator that took over in a coup in 1982, represented movement towards respecting human rights (Chomsky, 2015, 47). By subsequently maintaining that the regime of Mejía Víctores, that followed Montt, was also showing improvements he was in fact able to increase military aid to Guatemala (Chomsky, 2015, 47-58).

Like in other cases, the Reagan administration unabashedly preferred military dictatorship to what it perceived as a potential Marxist takeover in Guatemala. Some numbers are helpful to understanding the threat that the opposition force posed. In 1982 an alliance between revolutionaries seeking political change and the Mayan peasantry that had been oppressed for years formed. About half a million Maya were protesting, hundreds of thousands of supporters joined them, and between 6 to 8 thousand fighters were in armed rebellion. The alliance between the Maya and the guerillas was called the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). It was in response to this mass movement that in 1982 Montt, upon seizing control of the state, began conducting what can only be described as a genocidal scorched earth campaign against the URNG (Isbester, 2011, 131-155).

The URNG would not recover from Montt's offensive until 1987 when it continued its guerrilla efforts. During the time that the URNG was initially defeated and 1987 a new constitution had been ratified and elections had been held.<sup>11</sup> This is relevant because it correlates with an increase in military aid from the Reagan administration. Between 1986 and 1987 over 200 million dollars

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<sup>11</sup> Notably, the democratically elected government also abused human rights

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in military aid was supplied to Guatemala. Then, the administration requested about 140 million dollars for the fiscal years of 1988 and 1989 (Broder, 1988).

So, the Reagan administration's policy can be regarded as rhetorically and militarily supporting the Guatemalan government in every form it took while he was in office. The administration's rhetoric claimed human rights improvements seemingly to justify direct and increasing military aid.<sup>12</sup>

The central U.S. objective that both Carter and Reagan acted out in this case is the defense of a capitalistic government in Guatemala. This objective aligns with the historical precedent of the Monroe Doctrine and containment policy. Moreover, both seemingly did so via military support. In this case, it does not appear that either presidential personality affected U.S. objectives. It could be that because the civil war would not come to an end until the 1990s that the administrations did not see an opening to make a shift. Further, it is of note that the genocide of the Maya did not begin until after Carter. Thus, it is conceivable that the Carter administration would have stopped support after a certain threshold of abuse. That is impossible to know.

The objective in this case has been coined as the defense of a capitalist government because Guatemala was politically chaotic and had been for years. Leading up to and indeed throughout the Carter and Reagan administrations coups were commonplace in Guatemala. Telling is that in 1954 the United States intervened to eliminate a democratically elected leader who sought leftist reforms (Isbester, 2011, 131-155) and yet throughout these two administrations both military and

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<sup>12</sup> It should be emphasized that I've no evidence that anyone explicitly lied about the state of human rights in Guatemala. However, considering the state of affairs on the ground it would be hard to imagine that administration officials had no idea that the government(s) were not respecting human rights.

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civilian leaders received military support. Therefore, one can infer the underlying variable determining U.S. intervention to be the economic system espoused by the government. This conclusion is consistent with the continued arms flow despite human rights abuses.

Significant is that the insistence of a capitalist government is a form of political control. It has been deemed a defense of a capitalist government to reflect that it is a lesser form of political control than could otherwise be observed. The United States in this case was neither motivated to enact different policies towards democratic or military governments nor even policies to promote stability.

Important to discuss is the discrepancy between the Carter administration's rhetorical and legislative efforts and its substantive policy. It reveals the constraints on presidential personalities to make comport their own conception of U.S. objectives with the actions of the U.S. state. Carter openly took on Guatemala on human rights. In addition to rhetoric it did prohibit further arms deals with the government. At a surface level, one might conclude this to be an example of a presidential personality forcibly changing U.S. objectives. However, upon closer consideration it actually proves the difficulty a president faces to do so.

As discussed in this case, because arms had already been authorized they continued to flow only slightly below normal levels throughout most of the Carter years. That is to say nothing of the arms supplied by Israel. In summary, the U.S. president despite being publicly opposed to the shipment of arms to Guatemala oversaw that very act continued both by the government he oversaw and that of a close ally. Moreover, Carter was not willing to act beyond stopping arms deals in future.

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Despite his best efforts, the material military support for governments that served to prevent leftist governments continued under the Carter administration. Further, the rhetorical change did little to change the situation on the ground in large part due to actions taken by past administrations. Thus, the finding in this case that presidential personality did not impact the motivations underlying policy objectives is strong.

Notably, in this case the underlying motivator identified comports well with existing U.S. policy and the incentives of the Cold War system.

### **Case 3: El Salvador**

In the 1930s a left of center Autruo Araujo won the presidency legitimately. Simultaneously, a wave of communist party members won seats in the legislature. In response to the left's election, the military led by General Hernández Martínez overthrew the government and established a military dictatorship. The dictatorship evolved into oligarchy as the so called 14 families came to own most of the country's resources. The military government can be considered the defender to the wealthy class. Notably, in 1932 it executed La Mantanza (the massacre), a brutal put down of a popular uprising led by nationalist-socialists (White, 1984).

In the 1960s El Salvador, like other Latin American states, received military and specifically counterinsurgency training by the United States so that local forces could serve as the bulwark against communist uprisings. In El Salvador this initiative was run by a group called the Democratic National Organization (ORDEN). It was notorious for human rights abuses against the people of the countryside (White, 1984).



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So, when Carter took office U.S. policy towards the state up until that point was principally to keep the state prepared. Anti-government guerrilla forces had begun to organize in the early 1970s. Also relevant, El Salvador's economy was reliant on coffee which the United States is and was at the time a large importer of (White, 184).

In the first year of Carter's presidency, El Salvador had an election. Important to understand is that the elections were wrought with fraud. The Part of National Coalition Party's candidate won. This was the party of the military. Notably, in 1977 a ban on new arms deals to El Salvador was implemented (Chompsky, 2015, 140). The existence of show elections is important to note because it would join hands with the influence of the Nicaraguan case to influence the most substantive years of Carter's policy decisions in El Salvador, 1979 and 1980.

There was real fear in the late 1970s that the military regime would be overthrown (Chomsky, 2015, 140). This fear seemingly arose from two sources. First, the Sandinista overthrow of Somoza. Second, the existence of a ballot box to take over. In other words, the difficulty of establishing a democracy in which leftist candidates could legitimately win was reduced because a new system would not have to be created rather the existing one cleansed of fraud.

The Carter administration backed a military coup in 1979 meant to circumvent a potential revolution (Chomsky, 2015, 140-151). The officers that conducted the coup ousted two thirds of the military's senior officials. Influenced by the Carter administration, the first so called revolutionary junta contained three Social Democrats (left leaning civilians) and two members of the military's party. Of course, the real power remained in the hands of the military. Because the

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government would not cease its previously mentioned counterinsurgency campaign in the countryside, the Social Democrats quickly resigned from their posts (White, 1984).

After one more junta failed due to resignation by the civilian left, the government settled into a junta headed by José Napoleón Duarte. The new government nationalized the banking system and instituted U.S.-backed agrarian reforms (White, 1984). The Carter administration in collaboration with the new government seemingly sought to alleviate some of the left's complaints without allowing El Salvador to fall into leftist control.

The Carter administration then moved to lift a previous ban it had instituted on military aid to El Salvador in 1977 in order to support the new regime. So, in the last year of the Carter administration millions of dollars in military support flowed into Duarte's coffers. Significant is that right before the end of the Carter administration some American agrarian reform advisors in El Salvador were killed. Moreover, the guerilla group Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) began a major offensive against the government. In response, Carter granted an additional 10 million dollars in military support for the government just a week before Reagan would take office (White, 1984).

Upon taking office, Reagan quickly increased the allowed amount of U.S. military advisors in El Salvador. Under Carter it had been 19. Reagan moved it to 55 (White, 1984). As Reagan increased support, so did the guerilla's numbers grow. By 1984 they reached 10 thousand armed fighters (Chomsky, 2015, 148). That is not to say that Reagan caused this increase, rather that the scale of the battle was increasing and the administration was ready and willing to buy into the increased cost of defending the government.

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The Reagan administration also backed its commitment to El Salvador monetarily. Of note, to do this he used discretionary funds multiple times just within his first year of office. Assuming the statute allowing him to do so was enacted in good faith, the use of this fund reflects the belief on behalf of the administration that there existed an emergency that seriously and immediately threatened U.S. interests. Between 1981 and 1983 the administration influenced the IMF and World Bank to grant El Salvador over 300 million dollars in loans. Then, in 1984 it requested 300 million dollars in support for El Salvador from Congress (Bonner, 2016).

In 1983, when Duarte's government launched its largest military operation against the guerillas in the war, U.S. military advisors were present in an open way. There was no attempt to make U.S. military support and advice clandestine in this case (Bonner, 2016). In addition to tactical advice on the ground, the United States under Reagan also provided reconnaissance on guerilla positions from the air. This information helped to increase the accuracy of bombing missions carried out against the opposition forces (Chomsky, 2015, 170).

Reagan's policy towards El Salvador can be characterized as wartime support for the government. He inherited a wartime scenario and the war did not end until the George H.W. Bush administration. So, one cannot observe how the Reagan administration would have handled either an escalation or de-escalation of tensions. What can be observed is that Reagan sought to provide the El Salvadoran government with ample material and human resources to defeat the guerrilla forces. This observation comports well with Reagan's general policy of preventing the spread of communism in the third world.

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The principle objective acted out by both administrations in this case was to exert political control over El Salvador. Both administrations sought this goal via military support, political support, and direct consultation. The theme across both presidents was an involved effort to aid the military dominated government avoid the sort of overthrow that occurred in Nicaragua.

The details of this case in the Carter years are important to understanding what was motivating U.S. policy. Actions that Carter chose NOT to take in response to developments on the ground are telling. The coup in 1979 reflected a worry within the military itself that its rule would be overthrown. This worry is further demonstrated by its surface level concessions to the left. If one posited that Carter had through his proclamations cemented human rights as a primary U.S. foreign policy objective, then one would have expected in 1979 the administration to leverage the precarious position of the new government to permanently disband ORDEN forces and legitimize elections. It is evident that the United States had the means to do so. Moreover, the Carter administration had withheld aid from the military officials in power before the coup. So, there was some existing policy to build upon. However, the administration instead engaged the new government and helped it form a strategy to maintain power against the pleading of people on the ground like Archbishop Romero<sup>13</sup> who alerted the administration to the litany of abuses occurring. By choosing to support the government that would come to be headed by Durarte, the Carter administration demonstrated a prioritization of defending a US friendly and capitalistic government over the enforcement of human rights.

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<sup>13</sup> Notable figure in the El Salvadoran civil war. Important to insert here because he was an internationally known figure in El Salvador at the time of his open letters to the Carter administration.

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Political control is the correct way to frame the motivations reflected by U.S. action in this case. The Carter administration was influential in creating the agrarian reforms meant to demonstrate concessions to the peasantry and quell unrest. Moreover, Reagan advisors and intelligence were directly involved in the planning of Duarte's counterinsurgency strategy. A strategy which was carried out by U.S. trained ORDEN forces. These actions demonstrate that the United States sought to use El Salvador as a tool in its worldwide campaign against the USSR by keeping it within its own sphere of influence.

The actions of the Reagan administration further reflect a prioritization of political control above all else. Telling is the administration's use of discretionary fund money to support Duarte in its early days. This action required specifically that the administration consider U.S. interests to be in immediate danger. The situation on the ground was precarious for the new government.

Although a new cast of characters, important to note here is that the military was still the central power of the state. So, by supporting the new government with discretionary fund money the Reagan administration categorized the defense of a military government that the United States had been supporting since before the dawn of the Cold War as essential to U.S. interests. Thus, the administration can be thought of as implicitly citing the maintenance of the pro U.S. military government, i.e. political control, as a core U.S. interest.

Presidential personality did not appear to play any role in establishing US foreign policy objectives in this case. Both personalities sought the same fundamental goal despite Carter's human rights stance. This finding is strong because the developments in this case provided Carter with a clear chance to push his human rights agenda and yet he chose not to. Additionally, the Reagan administration pursued this goal at high monetary cost which reflects its importance.

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## **Comparative Analysis**

These cases confirm the hypothesis that foreign policy objectives result from incentives and pressures created by the international theater at large. Both administrations seemingly perused, albeit to different scales at times, the same goals in every case. These goals comport well with the pressure created by the international power struggle of the Cold War international theater.

Additionally, the perceived failure in case of Nicaragua in fact incentivized the implementation of more intense means to achieve the goal of political control in El Salvador by the Carter administration. This suggests that broad U.S. foreign policy objectives may become more important in an individual state after they are undermined in a close by state.

The secondary claim that foreign policy objectives evolve due to changes in historical situation and occasional paradigm shifts in international relations has also been supported by the evidence. The objectives of political influence in Latin America and preventing the spread of communism identified in the explorations of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and the Cold War are markedly similar to the objectives acted out in the cases. Further, the differences, at least superficially, appear to be due to historical context and a paradigm shift. For example, the United States became more capable and thus more able to concern itself directly with political influence in Latin America as opposed to the potential of influence.

The assertion flowing out of the hypotheses that foreign policy objectives exist largely independent from any individual leader is substantiated by the evidence. As observed in all three cases, an explicit effort by a presidential personality to change the fundamental objectives of the United States does little in the face of the state's organically created objectives.

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Important is an assessment of the limitations of this comparative analysis. The central limitation of this thesis is the metric used. Actions and the amount of resources used to execute those actions are used to discern the underlying motivation or goal. This metric is imperfect largely because it is trying to measure an abstract and uncertain entity. I.e. state objectives or motivators do not exist in a physical sense. They cannot be measured in the same way the volume of a pool can be measured. So, interpretation is intrinsic to any study of state objectives.

Further, several assumptions are made. It is assumed that the presidents and their administrations made an honest effort to further the objectives of the United States both in the cases examined and in the historical themes explored before the cases. Lastly, it is assumed that the administrations had good information to act upon.

Despite the limitations and assumptions that underlie this thesis, the confirmations remain strong. The qualitative evidence in all three cases revealed a significant difference in what Carter proclaimed to be an essential objective of U.S. foreign policy and the objective that his administration acted out. Compounding this evidence is the fact that in all three cases the Reagan administration ramped up Carter era policy as the situation on the ground became more and more unfavorable to underlying U.S. objectives. This reflects that both administrations identified the same underlying U.S. policy goals despite being from opposite political parties.

## **Additional Considerations**

I worry that because this thesis focused so much on whether Carter was able to make human rights a fundamental tenet of U.S. foreign policy that the reader may be led to believe that the I am against U.S. support for human rights. This could not be further from the truth. If Carter had

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proclaimed growing corn to be a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy, the study would have focused on whether or not the US began to shift its efforts to the cultivation of corn. What I'm after in this thesis is answering the question did human rights become a central tenet of U.S. through the actions of the Carter administration?

Overall, what I hope that the reader took away from this thesis paper is an understanding of how profound the sources of US foreign policy are. One should never reduce the national interests of the US, or any other state, to the interests expressed by an individual leader.

## **Conclusions**

This thesis has two potential implications for the international relations literature. Firstly, it adds to an existing pool of evidence suggesting that the realist theory of international relations is the most accurate theory available. Secondly, it invites more research into the mechanisms of the international system. It also has potential implications for U.S. policy makers.

This study repeatedly found the United States to be motivated by its security and power interests. Of course, the hypothesis looked at whether the international theater underlay and motivated U.S. policy objectives not which variables within the system were most relevant. Nevertheless, while testing the hypothesis themes of security and power repeatedly emerged. So, at the very least this thesis opens the door for realists to examine these cases and argue their theory to be substantiated. Moreover, the motifs of security and power call into question the claim that economics drive U.S. foreign policy advocated by dependist scholars.

Important for international relations scholars of all persuasion is the addition to the pool of literature a work specifically addressing a concern that could undercut the legitimacy of any



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theory. For any theory of international relations to be predictive of how states will act it needs to be assumed that there is some underlying reason or set of rules. That is not to say that the system needs a set of rules. In fact, realists expressly argue that it does not have rules rather patterns exist due to the nature of the system. Realist, like all theory makers, base their theory on the assumption that the motivations of a state are not completely random.

This thesis does add to the defense of theorists by providing evidence that the international theater is what drives states to adopt the objectives that they do. More exciting still is that it invites further study into the specific incentives and pressures that exist in the system. One could use this as a launchpad into a study on the potential impact proximity may have on the degree the United States is willing to invest in supporting its proxies.

Lastly, this thesis affects the world of policy makers. By taking the hypothesis and secondary claim together one is left with an obvious question, could someone predict the evolution of objectives within a consistent paradigm? This thesis removes the need for one to try and predict elections to predict the movement of U.S. foreign policy. I hope that this excites policy makers to engage with the international relations literature and try to develop predictive hypothesis on U.S. foreign policy based on international pressures.

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