A Wretched Record of Military Cooperation

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During the cold war, the United States poured millions of dollars into arming and training militaries in Central America to serve U.S. strategic goals – in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua before the 1979 Sandinista revolution. Washington wanted to stop what it perceived to be the threat of communist domination in its own “backyard.” As a result, the United States supported the armed forces of brutal authoritarian governments that shared the same vehement anti-communist ideology.

But the policy ignored the regimes’ complicity in murdering tens of thousands of their own citizens. The most infamous among the training centers was the School of the Americas (created in Panama and moved in 1984 to Fort Benning, Ga.), which graduated hundreds of officers who went on to become documented human rights abusers. But visiting officers attended dozens of other institutions as well, including the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, N.C., and the intelligence school at Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

The courses they took were not directed toward protecting national borders but crushing an “internal enemy” that sought to compel political and economic change through armed revolution.

The concept of “internal enemy,” as defined in U.S. doctrine and training manuals from the era, included civilian political opponents as well as armed guerrilla forces. Politicians, indigenous farmers, labor leaders, lawyers, students and human rights activists were considered equally legitimate targets by U.S. military allies. The death tolls were staggering. In El Salvador, the army killed an estimated 75,000 unarmed civilians during its 12-year civil war. Guatemala’s security forces were responsible for 93 percent of more than 200,000 civilians murdered between 1960 and 1996, according to a United Nations truth commission.

Instead of helping secure just democratic institutions, U.S. aid left countries with a legacy of repression and violence that the region still struggles to overcome today. One of Washington’s closest Central American allies, General Efraín Ríos Montt – a graduate of the School of the Americas, who took power in Guatemala in a military coup in 1982 and proceeded to unleash a savage counterinsurgency campaign against a small guerrilla army and its perceived civilian supporters – is now standing trial for genocide and crimes against humanity in a Guatemalan courtroom.

Using foreign armies as proxies for advancing U.S. security interests can’t work if the support flows to undemocratic or authoritarian governments. U.S. assistance for foreign militaries should take place only within a democratic context, and only with strict controls on how the aid is used, what units it flows to and how it is monitored by the United States.

Beyond the question of military aid, what could have been achieved if the United States had invested those millions instead in educational institutions, the economies and the justice systems of Central America? We can only imagine.