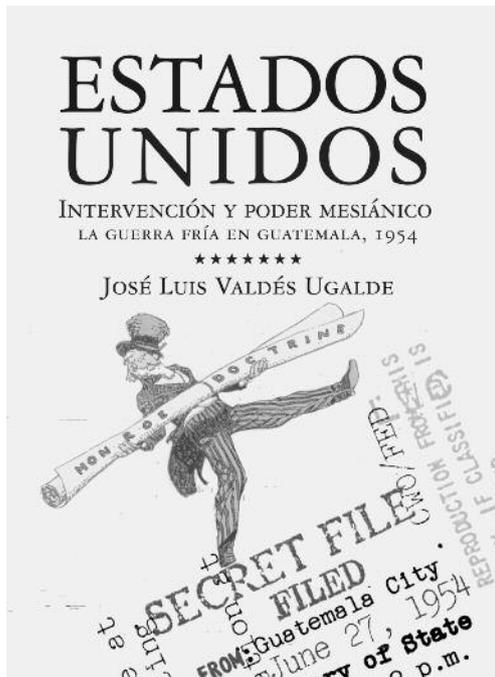


Reviews



Estados Unidos: intervención y poder mesiánico.

La guerra fría en Guatemala, 1954

(The United States: Intervention And Messianic Power.

The Cold War in Guatemala, 1954)

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde

CISAN/IIJ-UNAM

Mexico City, 2004, 406 pp.

Using the 1954 U.S. intervention in Guatemala as a case study, the book *Estados Unidos: intervención y poder mesiánico. La guerra fría en Guatemala, 1954* (The United States: Intervention and Messianic Power. The Cold War in Guatemala, 1954) by José Luis Valdés-Ugalde is undoubtedly an attempt to promote the knowledge and understanding of U.S. foreign policy toward

Latin America. It provides a series of fundamental historical and theoretical-methodological tools for understanding the roots, development and future lines of action of our northern neighbor's foreign policy.

The book's seven chapters center on the different forms of U.S. expansionism in the region and examine the arguments of the founders of U.S. geo-political expansionist thinking like MacKinder, Mahan, Spykman and Turner. It is also a detailed analysis of the 1954 U.S. intervention in Guatemala against the democratic, progressive government of Jacobo Árbenz: ideological construct, economic and political interests, military strategy and the creation of alliances all intertwine perfectly in the analysis.

Recovering the historical roots of U.S. expansionist doctrine and its Protestant-based vision that Americans are God's "chosen people," the author explains how the terms "exceptionalism" and "mission" constitute the historic cross-cutting themes of U.S. foreign policy. To this are added the feeling of superiority and the responsibility for maintaining freedom, order and progress. Also, following in the footsteps of authors like Octavio Paz, the book tries to explain the enormous differences between the United States and Latin America, the very concept of calling itself "America" and the meaning and function of Americanism as an ideology and instrument for domestic and international affirmation.

Historically, the Western Hemisphere has been the area of interest and natural hegemony for the United States. The end of its territorial expansion in the first half of the nineteenth century was followed by a quest for the maritime frontier and expansion into the Caribbean with the independence of Cuba in 1898, which marked the begin-

ning of economic expansion and constant U.S. interventions in the hemisphere. From that historic moment, going all the way through the Cold War and up until the present, the United States has been firmly convinced that: a) it is authorized to expand its model (the American Way of Life); and b) Latin America is its back yard and natural area of influence, which is why security in the region has always mattered, particularly in Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean because of their proximity.

The book's central hypothesis is that even though the Árbenz administration looked like a reform government because it took measures that pointed to economic and social improvements for the Guatemalan people, not necessarily aimed at installing a communist regime, and even given the absence of any evidence of Soviet involvement, the United States perceived the situation through the anti-communist-tinted lens of its national se-

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curity needs, disregarding diplomacy and resorting to intervention.

Valdés-Ugalde maintains that the ideological discourse that shored up U.S. policy toward Guatemala was subjective from the beginning given the characteristics of the country (economically weak and an insignificant military power) and that it overestimated Soviet participation in the hemisphere. Actually, the strategic interest of the United States opposed the needs and strategies of progressive regimes of the time, which means that more than acting against Soviet presence in the hemisphere, the intervention ended up being an exercise against national reform processes.

The coup d'état in Guatemala, made possible by the direct support of the Guatemalan military and the dictators of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza,

and the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, as well as Juan Manuel Gálvez, president of Honduras, became the model for successful U.S. intervention known as "cannon diplomacy." Thus, the fall of Árbenz inaugurated a paradigm of inter-American relations centered on the U.S. vision of security which heralded the beginning of a series of direct interventions in the region: the open intervention in Guatemala was followed by those in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, among others, using the pretext of the fight against the spread of communism and a rigid national security doctrine in the defense of American economic, political and military interests via the protection of the hemisphere's "territorial integrity." The result was the imposition of authoritarian regimes totally divorced from the Western values that the United States has always maintained in its discourse, like democracy, freedom and the respect for human rights.

It is possible to overlap the events of Guatemala and those of the present day in which the "other" (otherness), evil or the threat is centered in international terrorist organizations, in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction that could fall into the hands of these groups and cause enormous tragedies both inside and outside the United States. The September 11 terrorist attacks made it clear that no country, not even the most powerful country in the world, is exempt from that kind of suffering.

Today, the U.S. foreign policy agenda is centered on security, although it continues to espouse the principles of promoting democracy and human rights. Let us hope that, in contrast with what happened in Guatemala, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (regardless of whether they are just or not) are not the first of a series of wars unleashed in the name of the anti-terrorist crusade. ■■■

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