

Why Bernie Was Right to Oppose US Intervention in Central America

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Bernie Sanders speaks during a news conference on the separation of immigrant children at the US Capitol on July 10, 2018 in Washington, DC. (Alex Edelman / Getty Images)

Recently, an indignant Bernie Sanders called the *New York Times* to respond to a May 17 [hit piece](#). The article not-so-subtly condemned his support for the Sandinista revolution and opposition to US intervention in Central America in the 1980s.

“Let me just say this,” Bernie [told the paper](#). “I plead guilty to, throughout my adult life, doing everything that I can to prevent war and destruction. . . . As a mayor, I did my best to stop American foreign policy, which for years was overthrowing governments in Latin America and installing puppet regimes.”

Bernie made no apologies, nor exaggerations. The US record in Latin America is written in blood.

Central America, in particular, stands as a monument to the ravages of US imperialism. But his interviewer’s concerns were not with Reagan’s illegal Contra war in Nicaragua, US-backed death squads in El Salvador, or genocide in Guatemala. Instead, *New York Times* reporter [Sydney Ember](#) spent the better part

of the interview trying to skewer Bernie for attending, in 1985, a Sandinista rally in Managua that featured anti-imperialist slogans.

“Do you recall hearing those chants?” asked Ember. “My point was I wanted to know if you heard that,” she insisted. “Do you think if you had heard that directly, you would have stayed at the rally?” Bernie, after pointing to the United States’ rogue paramilitary campaign against the Sandinista government as the source of widespread anti-American sentiment in Nicaragua, responded with exasperation: “I think Sydney, with all due respect, you don’t understand a word that I’m saying.”

Bernie’s curt rebuttals drew some outrage from the liberal commentariat. But the presidential hopeful had responded in the only decent way: by rejecting the terms of the discussion entirely.

“The issue was,” he explained, “should the United States continue a policy of overthrowing governments in Latin America and Central America? I believed then that it was wrong, and I believe today it is wrong.”

The moral calculation that the exchange betrays is deeply chilling. Whether the product of naive beltway myopia or a cynical attempt to smear a socialist presidential candidate, Ember’s line of questioning implied a casual dismissal of the lives of those outside US borders. Unfortunately, this is hardly unique to Ember or the *New York Times*. From the genocidal violence of conquest to the mass incarceration and deportation of asylum seekers, the dehumanizing work of nationalism is central to the imperial project.

The attack on Bernie in the *Times* was not the first, and it won’t be the last. As the 2020 campaign heats up, Sanders’s solidarity with Central American victims of Reagan’s wars is likely to resurface. That’s why it’s important to be clear about the United States’ actions in the region at that time — and why Sanders was right to oppose them.

The Most Important Place in the World

The United States has a long history of interference in Central America, from propping up capital-friendly dictators and annexing vast swaths of territory for US corporate plantations and extractive industries, to imposing devastating structural adjustment policies and further destabilizing the region through mass deportation and militarization. For well over a century, US policy has sought to ensure that the region remains staggeringly unequal, largely undemocratic, and economically dependent on and politically subordinate to the United States.

Even so, US activities in Central America in the 1980s stand out for their depravity.

In this period, the region was rocked by revolutionary conflict. Inspired by the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Sandinista National Liberation Front toppled the Somoza

dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979; in 1980, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front launched a formidable insurgency in neighboring El Salvador, and in 1982 the National Revolutionary Unity was forged in Guatemala, reanimating a civil war that had begun in the aftermath of the 1954 US-orchestrated coup.

These movements sought liberation from centuries of oligarchic rule and dispossession. Were it not for the Cold Warriors in Washington, they might have achieved it.

As historian Greg Grandin argues, the ascendent New Right in the US saw the region's conflicts as an opportunity to reaffirm national purpose and military prowess after a dispiriting defeat in Vietnam. Central America became, in the words of Reagan's UN Ambassador, "[the most important place in the world](#)."

US advisors, arms, and aid turned the already impoverished isthmus into a laboratory for counterinsurgency warfare and radical neoliberal restructuring. Conspiring with a ghoulish crew of mercenaries, drug traffickers, fanatics, and tyrants, the United States waged a genocidal anti-communist crusade that left hundreds of thousands dead, tens of thousands disappeared, and millions more displaced — all in the name of freedom.

In El Salvador, the Reagan administration pumped more than a million dollars a day into the military dictatorship during the conflict's height. Some of the regime's atrocities made headlines in the United States: the 1980 [assassination](#) of Archbishop Oscar Romero, [now a saint](#); the rape and murder of [four US churchwomen](#) that same year; the 1981 [massacre of nearly a thousand civilians](#) in El Mozote; the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter at the Central American University (UCA).

But the [1993 UN Truth Commission](#) estimated that the war left at least seventy-five thousand dead and ten thousand disappeared, attributing 85 percent of the violence to the US-backed security forces and associated death squads — and only 5 percent to the rebels.

In Guatemala, the scorched earth campaign waged against rural Mayan communities by General Efraín Ríos Montt in the Ixil region in the early 1980s was deemed a genocide by the [1999 UN Commission for Historical Clarification](#). Reagan, in 1982, [called](#) the general a "man of great personal integrity" and declared he was getting "a bum rap on human rights."

By the war's end in 1996, more than two hundred thousand were dead, including forty thousand disappeared; 83 percent of identified victims were Mayan. The US-backed regime was responsible for at least 93 percent of the violence.

In Nicaragua, the US quest to overthrow the victorious Sandinista revolution led to one of the nation's greatest scandals: the [Iran/Contra Affair](#). After Congress outlawed covert military action against the Nicaraguan government in 1983, the

Reagan administration resorted to illicit methods. Top administration officials crafted elaborate conspiracies to purchase and smuggle arms and equipment to “Contra” paramilitary fighters. Their partners included the Israeli Mossad, Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, anti-communist [Cuban terrorists and mercenaries](#), and an assortment of Colombian and Mexican [drug cartels](#).

Contra forces attacked public schools and clinics and massacred civilians, even mining Nicaraguan harbors with CIA supervision. The plot finally blew up in 1986 after one of the CIA supply planes was shot down over Nicaragua; subsequent investigations revealed that funds for the operation had come from illegal weapons sales to Iran. Even so, Contra destabilization continued. By the decade’s close, the war had claimed more than thirty thousand lives.

The other nations of the isthmus also suffered. Honduras served as a staging ground for US military operations, most notably for the training and supplying of the Contra forces. Indeed, the country was known as the “USS Honduras” for its innumerable military bases, and US ambassador [John Negroponte](#) was referred to as “the proconsul.”

Belize and Costa Rica escaped the worst of Washington’s furies, but the [1989 invasion of Panama](#) by Bush Sr to topple Noriega left some three thousand dead and helped set the stage for the coming Gulf War.

An Anti-Imperial Presidency

The US role in the Central American wars is important not only for its spectacular cruelty and brazen flouting of domestic and international law, but as a critical link between interventions past and present. Many of the core Contra operatives met while serving in Vietnam, and several were also veterans of the CIA’s failed Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Negroponte, Reagan’s ambassador to [Honduras](#), was named ambassador to Iraq following the 2003 invasion, where the deployment of paramilitary death squads to torture, assassinate, and disappear suspected subversives was referred to as the “[Salvador option](#).” Elliott Abrams, convicted for his role in covering up the Contra conspiracy, was tapped by Trump to lead the US coup attempt against Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro. [Oliver North](#) just finished a brief stint at the helm of the National Rifle Association.

The *Times* article on Bernie’s foreign policy in Burlington quoted Otto Reich, who [ran Reagan’s propaganda shop](#) during the Contra War. Reich admonished Bernie for associating with “some of the most repressive regimes in the world.” In the 1980s, Reich deployed covert psychological operations (psyops) against the US press and political establishment with the objective of fostering support for the United States’ murderous allies in Central America and smearing opponents. He later served as

special envoy for Western Hemisphere Initiatives in the first George W. Bush administration.

Figures like Reich, Abrams, and North persistently resurface in the darkest centers of imperial power. These agents of empire's violent pursuit of accumulation embrace racist, nationalist ideologies, but the capital they serve knows no borders — nor should our struggle against them.

When Bernie traveled to Nicaragua, he was no lone dissident. He was part of a [mass movement of solidarity](#) that, drawing on the tradition of the Venceremos Brigades in Cuba, brought over ten thousand people to Nicaragua over the course of the decade to support the Sandinistas' effort to build a new, equitable society. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Solidarity Movement mobilized militant direct actions, marches, and congressional campaigns against US intervention, provided material support to Central American revolutionaries, and worked closely with the Sanctuary Movement to defend and shelter refugees.

Bernie's modest place in the [history of cross-border resistance to US imperialism](#) is worth celebrating. It sets him apart from even his most progressive rivals. The neocons can claim the most spectacular misdeeds in Central America, but the region's subjugation is a bipartisan project. After all, it was Hillary Clinton's State Department that legitimated the [2009 coup in Honduras](#), and the Obama administration that deported record numbers of Central American migrants, before outsourcing that task to Mexico in 2014.

Today, Central American victims of ongoing intervention, repression, and exploitation have been reduced to [bargaining chips](#) in US-Mexico trade relations, as the southern edge of the US border advances [into Guatemala](#). This age of resurgent nativism demands a candidate who recoils not at "anti-American" chants, but at the atrocities that provoke them. Despite the corporate media's chauvinist revisionism, Bernie's stand against US aggression in Central America places him squarely on the right side of history.