

"The Trump Regime and the U.S. War on Central American Refugees"

Mar 13, 2018

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"The [Suchiate River](#) that divides Chiapas, Mexico from San Marcos, Guatemala. In recent years, Mexico's Southern Border Program has resulted in a massive crackdown on migrants crossing this border."

In emphasizing the security threats facing the U.S., the Trump Administration's first State of the Union [address](#)¹ (delivered on January 30, 2018) targeted transnational criminal organizations, decrying the "open borders [that] have allowed drugs and gangs to pour into our most vulnerable communities." When read alongside the administration's other, notoriously racist, xenophobic comments criminalizing migrants, the speech could be—and has been—understood as a rationalization for escalated border enforcement and draconian policing.

That the menace headlining the address was [MS-13](#)²—a violent, transnational gang that first emerged in the Salvadoran refugee community of 1980's Los Angeles—also speaks to the short-sightedness of this and previous administrations' understandings of U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Central America. At a moment when the largest plurality of immigrants detained at the border hail from the Central American isthmus, an intransigent belief in the immutably poor and violent nature of (perceived or actual) gang members and drug dealers—dehumanized persons reduced to "[killers](#)³" and "[animals](#)⁴" from "shithole" countries—provides a useful scapegoat for a Trump regime bent on escalating the already-militarized security apparatus at its disposal. From the designation of MS-13 as a national law enforcement [priority](#)⁵ for the Justice Department, to the rollback (or threatened rollback) of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the Central American Minors (CAM) [refugee/parole program](#)⁶, and [Temporary Protected Status \(TPS\)](#)⁷ for Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans, recent policies targeting diasporic Central American communities fleeing political and economic violence indicate nothing less than a war-waging practice in cruelty.

This is also not the first time in recent history that Central Americans have been targeted: in the summer of 2014, U.S. asylum policies were thrust into the limelight when nearly 100,000 Central American

unaccompanied refugee children crossed the southwestern border. Upon learning that the vast majority of these children came from the 'Northern Triangle' countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a number of journalists seized an opportunity to [sensationalize](#)⁸ the region's intractable security problems and hopeless poverty as sources of the exodus, while [others](#)⁹ indicted U.S. foreign policy and punitive, anti-immigrant hysteria.

Roots of the 'Refugee Crisis'

Since the declaration of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, around time which most present-day Central American countries first declared independence from the Spanish empire, U.S. gunboat diplomacy has reigned over the internal affairs of the 'banana republics' in the imperial state's backyard. Acting at the behest of large North American enterprises like the United Fruit Company, successive U.S. military invasions throughout the twentieth century toppled local heads of state and insurrectionary armies, replacing them with business-friendly military regimes. Infamous examples include the annihilation of Augusto Sandino's guerrilla militia in 1933, as well as the CIA-backed coup that deposed Jacobo Árbenz, the social democratic Guatemalan president, in 1954.

Not until the final decade of the Cold War, however, did imperial intervention spur the largest U.S.-bound wave of Central American refugees, substantively transforming everyday life in a region that was turned—in the course of a bloody 'lost decade'—into a repressive laboratory for a new hemispheric security paradigm. Following the 1979 Sandinista Revolution that toppled a U.S.-backed military dynasty in Nicaragua, the Pentagon's new geopolitical approach to the region—one highlighted by a counterinsurgent doctrine of [low-intensity conflict](#)¹⁰—was used to not only undermine guerrilla groups' efforts against coffee oligarchies (particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador), but also regulate and control indigenous territories and insurgent cities for long-term economic extraction.

At a transitional moment of ascendant New Right nationalism, militarist fervor, and market fundamentalism, the Central American dirty wars also highlighted the potentially lethal and lucrative consequences of neoliberal warfare and its reliance on private mercenaries, proxy militias, counter-narcotics forces, and 'humanitarian' aid. Through millions of dollars' worth of security funds, arms, trainings, and military bases, the U.S.'s game-changing support to the region's brutal, anti-communist regimes bears much of the blame for the mass torture and terror that effected total loss of [more than 300,000 lives](#)¹¹—most (upwards of 80%) at the hands of U.S.-backed security forces.

Caught in the crosshairs of this counterinsurgent wars were Central American refugees, about a [million](#)¹² of whom fled to the United States. As thousands sought refuge in multicultural metropolises like Los Angeles, the same Central American migrants forcibly displaced by the U.S.-backed proxy wars were also almost universally barred from the sort of protections that would have enabled work permits and 'legal' status— in large part due to a politically circumscribed understanding of 'refugee.' That is largely because of the U.S. Congress' recent approval of the [1980 Refugee Act](#)¹³, which barred government funding to countries committing human rights violations. Since the Reagan Administration couldn't endorse the asylum claims of those fleeing El Salvador and Guatemala without drawing attention to its role in bolstering state repression and genocide, [less than 3%](#)¹⁴ of refugees from these countries were granted asylum by U.S. immigration authorities.

Rendered as external threats to national security, Central American refugees were forced into surviving within conditions of heightened, neoliberal precarity and racist police state aggression—with some effects being not only the formation of gangs like MS-13, but also the formation of [long-lasting](#)

[activist and auto-defense networks](#)¹⁵), including the Sanctuary Movement and civil society organizations like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)—movements critical to overdue enactment of the 1990 TPS program.

While the isthmus largely receded into the background with the end of the Cold War and the signing of peace agreements, the U.S. would nevertheless continue to enforce policies detrimental to Central America through structural adjustment programs, militarized '[deterrence](#)¹⁶', and the mass deportation of tens of thousands of MS-13 and Barrio 18 gang members. Excluded, stigmatized, and thrust into countries whose recently-transitioned civilian governments could scarcely offer integrative services for deportees, their forced exile exacerbated a fraught climate of privation, corruption, and impunity.

From Monroe Doctrine to Shock Doctrine in Central America

In her now-classic primer on the rise of [disaster capitalism](#)¹⁷ journalist Naomi Klein (2007) reflects on the ways the global pursuit of profit has been wedded to increasingly privatized warfare and militarism through the surreptitious use of shocks—be they disasters, coups, or terror attacks. According to Klein, the state-sanctioned inculcation of confusion, terror, and trauma serves to not only bolster those industries connected to the military-industrial complex, but also—as witnessed in the case of post-war Iraq or post-Katrina New Orleans—help pry open new markets, territories, and potential sites of foreign direct investment, often at the expense of indigenous populations and the racialized poor. For the neoliberal state, moreover, shocks not only boost the sales of arms and military technologies but also lay the foundation to more dispossession and capital accumulation, strengthening security forces while forcing civilians to evacuate claims to lands, resources, and rights.

In the Western Hemisphere today, there is no question that much of the old political and economic motivators of Cold War anti-communism is now served by the wars on drugs, gangs, and criminality. Such wars, in fact, have served as a pretext for the widespread militarization of everyday life in the Northern Triangle, where weakened social institutions, economic austerity, and polarized wealth provided conditions for the flourishing of transnational criminal networks.

In the early 2000s, as gangs became an intractable security problem, the three countries unveiled “Mano Dura” (“iron fist”) programs modeled off punitive, zero-tolerance approaches first experimented in the Reagan- and Clinton-era drug war in U.S. cities. Despite their [adaption](#)¹⁹ of U.S. anti-terrorist and anti-crime legalese (e.g. PATRIOT Act), Mano Dura’s controversial, strong-armed approach—which involves exploiting civilians’ everyday fears while empowering governments to terrorize, surveil, and punish with impunity criminalized youth—ultimately proved catastrophic to social cohesion, sewing distrust and rage as an [arms race](#)¹⁸ between authoritarian militarized security forces and the *maras* [gangs] escalated everyday violence.

Around the same time, the U.S. experimented with a [new drug war strategy](#)²⁰ that consisted of paramilitarizing regions dominated by cartels and the narcotics trade, starting first with Plan Colombia (2000) before being expanding to Central America and Mexico through the Mérida Initiative (2007) and CARSI (the Central America Regional Security Initiative, 2010). First pursued as an alternative transshipment route following militarized drug enforcement in Colombia and Mexico, the Northern Triangle was exploited by narco-networks in no small part due to the destabilizing effects of the 2006 Central American Free Trade Agreement ([CAFTA-DR](#)²¹) and subsequent global economic recession.

As the region became a central hub for more than two-thirds of cocaine trafficked to the U.S., CARSI opened up new avenues for an expanded U.S. military presence, facilitating an unprecedented southbound transfer of military-grade arms, technologies, and training. Between CARSI's implementation in 2008 and the 2014 child refugee crisis, U.S. Congress appropriated nearly [\\$1.2 billion for Central American security aid](#)²²—funds that helped equip, train, and develop special operations forces, elite battalions, military police, and border patrols, among other groups.

Unsurprisingly, the [CARSI-mediated militarization of Central American society](#)²³ has also enabled a brutal state repression that also harkens back to the years of anti-communist counterinsurgency: as the military, police, and private security forces continue to fill urban streets, an untold number of [conflicts](#)²⁴ have erupted over land and resources in recent years, leading to the imprisonment, disappearance, and assassination of hundreds of activists, journalists, and leaders within marginalized communities (including women and Indigenous, Afrodescendent, and LGBT communities). This is particularly the case in regions where agro-export and extractive industries have engaged in low-intensity conflicts with indigenous and campesino communities, with elites bankrolling corrupt military forces and private mercenaries in places like the Honduran [Aguán Valley](#)²⁵—where more than a hundred people have been extrajudicially killed in skirmishes against a palm oil corporation—and the Indigenous Lenca territory of Río Blanco, where the March 2016 assassination of famed environmentalist [Berta Cáceres](#)²⁶ followed a years' long resistance against a proposed hydroelectric dam.

Alliance for (In)Security

In 2014, just months after the child refugee crisis garnered international attention, the three Northern Triangle states announced a multi-billion dollar "[Alliance for Prosperity](#)²⁷" (A4P) initiative aimed at tackling the primary drivers of displacement through increased investments in citizen security, juridical institutions, and transportation and energy infrastructures. As an initiative written in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the A4P shares much of the same language as the Obama Administration's \$750 million complementary aid package, the "[U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#)²⁸," and its emphasis on three foundational pillars of prosperity, governance, and security. Yet, as with CARSI, the A4P initiative has been [criticized](#)²⁹ by grassroots organizations for weaponizing migration to advance militarization, and doing so to suppress resistance to renewed rounds of resource extraction and foreign investment.

For its part, under the presumed pressure of the Obama Administration, the Mexican Peña Nieto Administration launched the "[Southern Border Program](#)³⁰," a security scheme that has been roundly condemned for re-militarizing a transit zone some officials have considered to be the [U.S.'s true southern border](#)³¹. Despite a professed aim of 'protecting' border-crossers, the Southern Border Program—with its unprecedented crackdown of Central American migrants some have rightfully called an '[\[animal\] hunt](#)'³²—exemplifies a shift in U.S. border control strategy, transferring the bulk of the operations of detaining, jailing, and abusing Central Americans to Mexico (where deportation rates have [exceeded](#)³³ those of the U.S. in recent years). By outsourcing the 'dirty work' of its massive deportation machine, the U.S. has effectively created a new line of defense against the migrant 'threat,' forcing desperate refugees through a perilous [gauntlet](#)³⁴ of rough terrains, jungles, and coastal waters.

While all three initiatives purport to tackle the 'root causes' of violence-driven emigration using the benign-sounding discourse of development, these initiatives nevertheless embody the neoliberal state's demands for socio-spatial control, coupling the militarization of borders, cities, and the resource-rich countryside with free trade policies and conditional investments by international financial

institutions. (This pairing of economic and militarized security was also notable in Trump Administration's [Central American Security Conference](#)³⁵ in Miami in June 2017.) In fact, there's good reason to believe that Central America is serving once again as 'empire's workshop'³⁶, becoming ground zero for a re-launched counterinsurgency against migrants and activists as a decentralized, transnational network of U.S.-funded military bases and hybrid security forces (including a [Tri-National Anti-Gang Task Force](#)³⁷) have mounted attacks on refugees' rights to movement and asylum.

At a time of life-and-death urgency for our communities, it's imperative that we not only acknowledge the *longue durée* of U.S. imperialism and the devastating impact of foreign policy failures, but that we also critically assess the linkages between militarism, migration, and neoliberalism in the resource wars that have exploded in the isthmus in recent years. To do so, we need to look past the spectacle of border walls and the whitewashed rhetoric of an "America First" foreign policy, examining instead the reasons for *why* certain war-making technologies are used—and against *whom*. Doing so will allow us to see the low-intensity warfare for what it actually is: a war against refugees, communities, and popular resistance.



"Mural in the Fray Matías Human Rights Center (*Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías*) in Tapachula, Chiapas"

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