



LARC Resources on Central America

Edited from guide by Rachel May

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These materials can be found on the online searchable catalog:
<http://stonecenter.tulane.edu/pages/detail/48/Lending-Library>

This guide presents only some of the information relating to Central America in the LARC collection. Additional resources can be identified on the LARC website. This guide provides some background information on Central America as well as a description of LARC resources related to Central America.



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Central America is an important region of the world for North Americans. It has been tied to the United States both economically and politically for more than one hundred years. Despite the importance of the region, it has been virtually ignored in pre-college curricula and receives only minimal attention in undergraduate education. Studies show that most North American adults are unfamiliar with even the most basic geography of the region.

The fact that students have not been given access to accurate information concerning this region is particularly alarming because the Caribbean Basin (including Central America) has been more important economically, politically, and militarily to the United States than any other region of Latin America. The overwhelming majority of US military actions in Latin America have taken place in the Caribbean Basin, particularly in Cuba and Nicaragua. The dominance of US investment in Central American agriculture, particularly the fruit industry, led to the pejorative term "Banana Republic." The United States has had an enormous political impact on the region as well. Central America has always been viewed as an important region by US foreign policy makers and investors. No other region in the world has been so influenced by the United States, yet junior high and high school social science and history texts show a decided lack of interest in this vital region.

It is important to educate students at all levels about the history and contemporary realities of the seven Central American republics (Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama) so that they can understand contemporary news coverage, and so that they will be responsible US citizens, and perhaps even policy-makers, in the future. LARC has hundreds of resources on Central America, some of which are discussed here along with some background information concerning the history, current political status, and artistic and literary traditions of Central America.

Introductory Materials

LARC has two print guides for teachers which address Central America in the pre-college curriculum. The first is *Central America: What US Educators Need to Know* (I CA 6). This bulletin has useful articles on what is missing from children's books and educational materials, what sort of stereotypes teachers are likely to encounter, the roles of women, indigenous peoples, and African American in Central America, and a sample lesson plan for teaching about conflict in El Salvador in the 1970s and 80s. The Organization of American States article "What Children in the US Learn about Central America" (I CA 5) is another useful resource. This article exposes the disinformation, racial prejudice, and cultural and political insensitivity that have been propagated about Central America through teaching materials. A good introduction to the seven countries of Central America for junior high or high school students is Part III of *Central America Today: Nations in Transition* (HC CA 11). This film covers each of the seven republics separately providing an overview of the geography, economic and political trends of each country.

History

The history of Central America spans from the pre-Columbian period to the recent past. Important aspects of Central American history include pre-Columbian period, the colonial period, independence, and the violence in the region in the 1970s and 80s. Modern political climates have stabilized the region, although violence from drug trafficking and other issues continues to be problematic.

The Maya Past

The Maya peoples lived in much of what is now Central America (Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador) and modern day descendants of the Maya continue to live in Guatemala,



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Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as parts of Southern Mexico. The Maya culture spans from about 2000 BC to the present, with the most recognizable characteristics present between AD 200 – 1000. Much is known about the Maya, both from their artistic and written traditions but also through extensive archaeological investigations in the region. Early explorers identified ruins of Maya cities as early as the mid-1800s and archaeological investigations in the region continue to the present.

Early explorers of the region include John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, whose narratives and illustrations of the ruins provide compelling reading for students. Stephens' books, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (two volumes) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (two volumes) provide an interesting glimpse of early exploration of Maya ruins as well as a glimpse at the political situation in Central America at the time. Stephens was in Central America in theory as a representative of the United States government to the governments of Central America. He spent much of his time travelling to Maya sites instead.

LARC holds many useful resources concerning the Maya. A guide devoted to these resources – “LARC Resources about the Maya,” is available for free download on the LARC website and has an extensive list of these resources as well as a list of external sources of information concerning the Maya. A few resources which might be helpful include *The Mystery of the Maya* (MY 15), a documentary which relates the previous Maya to the modern day descendants, and discusses art, science, architecture, and engineering of the Maya. Most useful for high school and college level courses. *Popol Vuh: Creation Myth of the Maya* (MY 24) uses images from Maya pottery as the basis of an animated portrayal of the *Popol Vuh*, a version of the Maya creation myth. Although an animated film, this is not a good film for young students, best used for high school or college level courses. Various image resources are available from LARC as well. Some of these images are available for free download on the LARC website, while others are still only available for short term loan. The guide devoted to the Maya has a more complete list of these resources.

Colonial Heritage

The conquest of the Americas by Europeans signaled a new epoch in the history of Central America. LARC has several resources on European conquest none of which are specific to Central America. Generally the focus of most resources is the Spanish conquest of Central Mexico. The conquest of Central America shares many characteristics with this area, although it does have some differences; the conquest of Central America was as violent and disruptive as conquests of other parts of the Americas. Pedro de Alvarado, the conquistador responsible for conquering much of Central America, particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, was known for his particularly cruel and violent actions. He later served as the Spanish Governor of Guatemala until his death in 1541. Although first attempts at conquest of the region were made in 1524, the conquest was not complete until 1697 when the site of Nojpeten, located in the Peten region of Guatemala, was defeated. The Spanish had control of parts of this region prior to 1697, but never complete control. The conquest of Central America provides an interesting counterpoint to that in Central Mexico and Peru and can provide a glimpse as to how the Spanish governed an area over which they did not have complete control.

The colonial period history of Central America varies by which area of Central America is discussed. Much of Central America was of little interest to the Spaniards due to the lack of mineral resources in the region. Several accounts of colonial life were recorded, predominantly by the Spanish Friars' who were attempting to convert the native populations to Catholicism. Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican friar, wrote accounts of Spanish treatment of native peoples of Central America, particularly in Guatemala. He became known as the “Protector of the Indians,” and his writings provide informative and colorful depictions of colonial life in Central America. Colonial government documents and documents written by Maya peoples in the Colonial period provide further information about life in Colonial Central America.

Panama was an important area to the Spanish during the Colonial period. For much of this era, silver and gold mined in present-day Bolivia and Peru passed through the isthmus before it was shipped



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back to Spain. Spanish goods were likewise transported across the isthmus before reaching their final destinations on the Pacific coast of the Americas or in other Spanish colonies across the Pacific, such as the Philippines.

Guatemala was the seat of Spanish government in the region, as well as the site of the first university. The Guatemalan colony included much of Central America as well as parts of southern Mexico. The colonial architecture and art of Guatemala is magnificent. Colonial architecture and religious art are showcased in the lively “Guatemala Por Dentro” series. This high-quality Guatemalan television series is excellent; however it is in Spanish without subtitles. It would therefore be best for intermediate or advanced level Spanish, or bilingual or immersion courses. The series includes four videos. Three of them, *La Merced: Paintings* (AC GUA 3), *La Merced: Retablos* (AC GUA 4), and *The Church of Santo Domingo and the Religious Festivals in San Martín Obispo* (two episodes) (AC GUA 5) feature religious art. The fourth tape, which is probably more interesting for general audiences, contains two episodes *Convite y Fiesta Virgen* and *Nim-Aj Kij Tui Oshfiesta* (DF GUA 4). The first segment traces the history of the *Ciudad Vieja*, the original capital established by Pedro de Alvarado, who is considered to be the primary conquistador of Central America. The second documents a syncretic religious festival from the Chichicastenango area. The entire series is highlighted by a very good soundtrack and lively narration.

Students who do not understand Spanish can get a taste of colonial Guatemalan architecture from the image packet *Colonial Architecture of Antigua Guatemala* (AC GUA 6). Many famous examples of Guatemalan architecture are found in the modern day city of Antigua, which served as the capital of the Guatemalan colony for 200 years. Two earthquakes in 1717 and 1773 destroyed much of the architecture in Guatemala. Many of the churches are still partially in ruins and were never fully repaired after the earthquakes in the 1700s. The series of earthquakes also lead the Spanish to change the capital to modern day Guatemala City, which Spanish authorities felt was a safer location for the capital after the series of destructive earthquakes and the threat of volcanic eruption from the nearby volcanoes in Antigua.

One additional point of interest in the Colonial history of Central America is the different trajectory of Belize. Belize was never completely under Spanish control. While the Spanish attempted to pacify Maya peoples both to the north, in Yucatan, and to the west, in the Peten region of Guatemala, the Spanish never controlled modern-day Belize. In fact, many Maya peoples attempting to escape colonial rule in Yucatan moved south to Belize. Beginning in the late 1600 and early 1700s, British settlers occupied the coastal areas of Belize to control logging resources. The British and Spanish were in conflict over control of the area; a treaty in 1763 granted the British rights to log the area, but not to control settlement. Conflicts in the region continued until British settlers defeated Spanish colonial forces in 1798. The British maintained colonial rule over Belize from 1798 onward, although the British were in conflict with native Maya inhabitants until the late 1800s. Colonial period Central America can be easily compared with Spanish governance in other areas, including Central Mexico and South America, to illustrate the variation in Spanish Colonial rule. Variation within Central America is also of interest, particularly the different trajectories seen in Belize and the rest of the region.

Political Conflict in the 1970s and 80s

The 1970s and 80s were a period of extended political violence in many countries of Central America. Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama were dominated by political unrest during this period. Belize and Costa Rica were relatively stable during the 70s and 80s, although the conflict in the region had general destabilizing affects. Belize remained a colony of Great Britain until 1981 and largely has a different historical trajectory than the other Central American nations.

General information on political conflicts in Central America focuses on the revolutions in Central American countries. Most of these revolutions, or civil wars, revolved around conflicts between leftist governments focusing on issues of poverty, equal land distribution, and equal rights for all citizens, versus conservative governments interested in maintaining the status quo. *Central America Close-Up* (SI CA 6)



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is a documentary with interviews of teenagers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. They are filmed during their routine daily activities, at school, dancing at parties, hanging out with friends, etc., yet their stories are powerful and their experiences are harrowing.

Another classroom material which is very useful for teaching students about conflict in Central America is the simulation game *Bullets and Ballots* (HC CA 9 GAME). Players are divided into five teams representing the government, the army, the upper class, the guerrillas, the peasants and workers, and the US government. Although this game is specifically about Guatemala, the major issues can be generalized to other conflicts. It is appropriate for grade 10-college. The authors have included lesson plans, preparation instructions, and research activities for five 50 minute class periods, but the game itself can be played in 90-120 minutes.

Guatemala is one of the Central American nations which suffered from civil unrest during the 1970s and 80s. The guerilla war in Guatemala began in 1960 and continued until 1996. The fighting involved the government of Guatemala and various leftist political groups. The Guatemalan government committed acts of genocide against the native Maya populations during this conflict; between 40-50,000 people 'disappeared' during the conflict; many of whom were killed by government forces. 1996 marked the first free democratic elections after a United Nations brokered peace treaty between the different factions. Guatemala is continuing to see the consequences of this 36 yearlong internal conflict. In particular, forensic anthropologists have begun excavating mass graves of those killed by government forces during the conflict. The mass graves provide evidence of the atrocities committed and allow the remains of those killed to be returned to their families. The most recently elected president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, served as a general in the Guatemalan military during the conflict, which has raised questions with some both inside and outside Guatemala who worry that attempts to bring to light atrocities by the military during the conflict will be silenced by the current administration.

The Dark Light of Dawn (SI GUA 2) is a good way to introduce the roots of violence and human rights violations in Guatemala. This video was produced by the Guatemala Human Rights Commission and is a good overview of human rights violations. *Guatemala: When the Mountains Tremble* (HC GUA 2) is an excellent documentary about the violence in Guatemala narrated by the popular leader and Maya spokeswoman, Rigoberta Menchú, who was awarded the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. This video works well with Rigoberta Menchú's moving testimonial, *I Rigoberta Menchú*. The testimonial and the documentary focus on racism and Maya identity in the midst of the genocidal campaign against the Maya population. The documentary does not pretend to take an objective view of the conflict, and the personal testimony of Rigoberta Menchú is very emotionally powerful. The documentary is almost two hours long and is best viewed in one sitting. The Guatemala segment of the series *The Houses are Full of Smoke* (HC CA 12 Part A) is also an excellent documentary about the violence and human rights abuses in Guatemala. It borrows much of the film footage from *When the Mountains Tremble*, but tries to be more objective by providing historical context. Both films contain graphic depictions of torture and scenes of violence in Guatemala. *Roads of Silence* (HC GUA 6) is another very good documentary about an indigenous community of refugees. The Maya discuss their perspective on the world and the violence perpetrated by the army, shedding light on the ethnic dimensions of the conflict in Guatemala.

Two films about the highland Maya community of Todos Santos demonstrate the effects of the violence on Maya communities. *Todos Santos Cuchumatán* (IND GUA 1) is a documentary about village life in a small highland indigenous community from the Mam ethnic/linguistic group. Made in the late 1970s, this documentary pre-dates the worst of violence in the highlands, and it documents many cultural and socio-economic aspects of the town focusing on economic exploitation of Maya peoples by ladinos. In 1987 a second documentary was made, *Todos Santos: The Survivors* (SI GUA 1), which documents the effects of the violence on the community. Some of the people portrayed in the first video had disappeared and most of the surviving villagers were reluctant to speak or appear on camera; those who did were clearly nervous. The community was divided and the military presence was evident.

Several films discuss the rise of democratically elected regimes during the conflict, particularly in the 1980s. *Guatemala: From Bullets to Ballots* (HC GUA 3) is a documentary about the transition to



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civilian rule which preceded the 1985 election of Vinicio Cerezo. *CBS "Sixty Minutes" Interview with Guatemalan President Cerezo* (HC GUA 4) was conducted soon after Cerezo took office in 1986. He discusses the possibilities for democracy in a military-dominated state in a surprisingly frank manner. *Under the Gun: Democracy in Guatemala* (HC GUA 5) takes a much more cynical view of the significance of the election of a civilian president in 1985. This program is critical of the human rights record of post-1985 Guatemala, and violent repression. Any of these three documentaries could be used as background for a discussion on the meaning of democracy and the relative importance of elections in a democratic society. It is important to keep in mind that although democratically elected governments were in power in the 1980s in Guatemala the civil conflict continued and human rights violations continued until the 1996 peace treaty.

El Salvador also suffered from internal civil conflict in the 1970s and 80s. Similarly to Guatemala, human rights abuses by the military and right wing death squads typify the period of conflict. The conflict in El Salvador was between a right-wing military government and various left-wing guerrilla groups. The conflict has its roots in historical conflict in the region but came to a point in 1977 and 1979 when military rulers took power, first through fraudulent elections in 1977 and in 1979 through a coup overthrowing the 'democratically' elected government. Despite supposedly open, democratic elections in the 1980s, the killing and violence continued until 1992 when the Chapultepec Peace Accords were signed in Mexico. The United Nations had monitors in El Salvador from 1991-1997 to monitor the implementation of the peace accords. After the end of the conflict, the Commission for the Truth for El Salvador was established to bring to justice the perpetrators of human rights abuses during the civil war. The commission is investigating the deaths and disappearances of thousands of civilians from 1977-1992.

Crisis in Central America: Battle for El Salvador (HC ELS 1) is a good overview of the origins of the conflict in Central America. It covers events starting in 1932 to explain the lead up to the conflict. The film contains several graphic scenes of assassinations and mutilated corpses. *Dateline San Salvador* (HC ELS 7) is an analysis of the different socio-economic sectors which participated in the May Day protest demonstrations of 1986. The documentary systematically treats each of the diverse sectors participating (the middle class, students, human rights activists, refugees, peasants, and trade unionists), giving the viewer a sense of the costs of war and government repression from a variety of perspectives. *Guazapa: The Face of War in El Salvador* (HC ELS 8) is a documentary about an FMLN-controlled area of El Salvador during the mid-1980s. This documentary is a good tool for explaining what motivates guerillas in Central America, and how they live. *Media War in El Salvador* (SA ELS 1) is a documentary about the 1989 elections and the role of campaign advertising, especially the television advertising designed by US media consulting firms. The premise of this documentary is that these television images shift focus away from the real issues facing countries like El Salvador. The film also discusses the propaganda campaigns and the use of different media by the Salvadoran army and the FMLN. *The Situation* (HC ELS 6) is also relevant to a discussion of journalism, media, and the war in El Salvador. This documentary was produced by a team of journalists who spent a year in the small town of San Vicente, El Salvador. The producers of this documentary were concerned with the effects of war on everyday life in a small Salvadoran town; they discuss the limitations faced by journalists who are based in the capital city of San Salvador and the risks undertaken by journalists who cover the war.

El Salvador: The Seeds of Liberty (HC ELS 4) is a documentary about human rights abuses and the relationship between these abuses and the economic inequities in El Salvador. Because this documentary was produced by the Maryknoll religious order, there is a strong focus on the work and martyrdom of church leaders in El Salvador. The stories of four North American missionary women who were murdered in 1980 and of Archbishop Oscar Romero are recounted here using taped interviews and video footage. The El Salvador segment of *The Houses are Full of Smoke* (HC CA 12, Part B) discusses the US role in the conflict. It has rare footage of an interview with Archbishop Oscar Romero, completely subtitled as well as interviews with former army and police officials, US military and diplomatic officials, and regular citizens. It includes graphic scenes of mutilated bodies and descriptions of torture techniques.



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Nicaragua was also embroiled in conflict for much of the 1980s, although the path toward this conflict was different than that in Guatemala and El Salvador. From 1936-1979 Nicaragua was controlled by an oppressive dictatorship run by the Somoza family. Anastasio Somoza first took control of the country in 1936, he ruled until 1956 when he was assassinated and his son, Luis Somoza Debayle, took power. Somoza Debayle, while not always officially the Head of State, retains his influence and position in the government until 1979. In 1972, after a devastating earthquake, US troops intervened to maintain the Somoza dictatorship. By 1978 the situation in Nicaragua worsened and the Sandanistas, Frente Sandanista de Liberación Nacional, launched attacks against the military. In 1979 Somoza fled to Paraguay where he was assassinated in 1980.

The Sandanistas took power in 1979 and instituted political, economic, and social reforms including agrarian reform which redistributed land from the large landholders. The early years of the Sandanistas were also focused on righting the human rights violations that had occurred during the Somoza dictatorship. Many Sandanistas had been tortured by the regime, and thus attempted to give trials to those in prison and interact with political rivals in a non-violent manner. In 1981 the US Reagan administration labeled the Sandanistas communists and started to support the Contras, a counter-revolutionary guerilla group attempting to overthrow the Sandanista government. Reagan suspended all aid to Nicaragua providing money to the Contras instead. From bases in Honduras, the Contras attacked various parts of Nicaragua. The ongoing conflict muted the social and political changes of the Sandanistas.

A new era began in 1985 when democratic elections were held, electing Daniel Ortega, of the Sandanistas, to a six year term as president. The Arias Plan, a regional peace plan drawn up by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sanchez, was signed in 1987 and Nicaragua began to move toward a peace agreement. The National Reconciliation Commission was established and plans for new elections were drawn up. A coalition of opposition forces, National Opposition Union (UNO), ran Violeta Barras Chamorro as their presidential candidate, and in relatively peaceful elections in 1989, the UNO defeated the Sandanistas. Ortega and the Sandanistas turned power over to UNO in 1990 and the conflict in the country ceased.

Resources about the political conflict in Nicaragua include: *Crisis in Central America: Revolution in Nicaragua* (HC NIC 3), an excellent video which discusses the historical process leading up to the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 and the immediate aftermath of that revolution. This clear, objective documentary is highly recommended for both high school and college. It contains some graphic footage of violence including the point-blank assassination of a US journalist. *Son Nica* (HC NIC 12), a documentary about the 1984 elections in Nicaragua, is a useful resource which contains interviews with Sandinistas and non-politicians. Many in the United States did not realize that the Sandinistas were democratically elected in 1984, and this film might help to remedy this common misconception. The documentary takes a critical stand against the US role in supporting the Contra forces.

LARC also has two documentaries about the 1989 elections in Nicaragua. *Did they Buy It?* (HC NIC 16) uses interviews with Nicaraguan voters of both parties, UN directed election observers (including US actor Ed Asner), and Nicaraguan and US journalists to discuss not only the issues at stake in the election, but also US press coverage. The film discusses issues of government manipulation of the media. It is particularly useful for advanced high school or beginning college classes because it gives a brief historical review for those unfamiliar with Nicaraguan politics. *Ten Years/Ten Days* (HC NIC 17) is an attempt to add the experiences and impressions of a ten-day stay in Managua during the elections to those which most North Americans formed from network news coverage. The video consists of footage of political rallies, speeches, the actual voting process, and discussions and arguments among ordinary people in the streets of Managua. There is minimal narration and no analysis or commentary. This lack of analysis makes it difficult for people who are not familiar with Nicaragua to follow the discussions, but it also makes the film an excellent resource for those who want to analyze the process, the players, and public opinion to form their own views. This film is highly recommended for advanced college classes on



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Central American or Nicaraguan politics, and also for instructors who want additional background on the 1990 elections.

Honduras has a different trajectory during the 1970s and 80s than the other countries discussed so far. Throughout the 1940s-1982 Honduras was controlled by a series of military dictatorships. The 1970s were a particularly turbulent time, with several coups and rapid transitions between dictatorships. Honduras also served as the base for US military and intelligence operations in Central America in the 1970s and 80s. The Contras, the Nicaraguan opposition forces, used Honduras as a training ground and base of operations. Honduras was also a base of operation for El Salvadorian forces. The US military trained Honduran forces in counterterrorism operations, particularly in the use of torture. Many Honduran military leaders were trained at the School of the Americas where interrogation and torture techniques were taught. The military leaders of the 1970s in Honduras violated the human rights of many Hondurans, including using torture and the 'disappearance' of dissidents.

In 1980 steps were made to transition to a democratically elected government, including writing a new constitution. The constitution was approved in 1982 and the first democratically elected president took office. The human rights abuses by military officials continued through the early 1980s, during this period of democratically elected leaders. Although Honduras was relatively stable throughout the 1970s and 80s it suffered from the violence in the region as well. Not only did the United States use the country as a base of operations, training Nicaraguan and El Salvadorian forces, who also used the country as a base, the government of Honduras, afraid of the spread of violence to Honduras, utilized brutal methods such as killings and torture to eliminate any opposition to their rule. *Seeing Windows* (DEV HON 1) is an excellent video on economic and political life in Honduras in the 1970s and 80s.

Honduras successfully transitioned between democratically elected leaders in peaceful elections until 2009. Jose Manuel Zelaya, elected president in 2005, was removed from power in a military coup in 2009. In November of 2009 the country held previously scheduled elections, where Porfirio Lobo was elected president. He established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the fallout of the coup, and the country has returned to political stability since the 2009 coup.

Panama has an interesting political history, much of which is tied to the US interest in the Panama Canal. In 1903 the United States and Panama signed a treaty granting the US sovereignty over an area in Panama, called the Panama Canal Zone. The Panama Canal is a 48 mile long canal which allows ships passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The US controlled an area of about 50 miles, 25 on either side of the canal. On December 31, 1999, the US returned control of the canal to Panama, as was negotiated in a 1977 treaty.

The political history of Panama was influenced by US interests and involvement in the country. From 1903 – 1968 Panama was a democracy, with democratically elected leaders. In 1968 there was a military coup, and a military dictatorship was established under the rule of Omar Torrijos. Torrijos died in 1981, bringing his rule to a close. Although there were amendments to the Constitution in 1983 to bring a return to civilian rule, Manuel Noriega retained control of both military and civilian rule in Panama. The Noriega regime was oppressive and much resistance to the regime developed throughout Panama. Noriega was initially supported by the US government, as the opposition were thought to be communists, and thus against US interest in the region, particularly the Canal. Noriega repressed any opposition through torture, killings, and kidnapping of dissidents. In 1987 the US withdrew their support of Noriega and the regime, withdrawing economic and military assistance to Panama and in 1989 freezing Panamanian assets in the US. This did little to stop Noriega but was detrimental to the Panamanian economy.

In 1989, the US invaded Panama. This invasion was justified to protect their interests in the Panama Canal, and to safeguard the lives of US citizens in Panama. The invasion of Panama resulted in civilian deaths, although clear numbers of deaths are not known. Many areas of Panama City were destroyed in bombardments, which resulted in financial hardship for the inhabitants of these regions. Noriega was captured by the US and was convicted of drug trafficking charges and incarcerated. After



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the invasion a commission to bring about civilian rule was established and democratic elections were held in May of 1989. Since then civilian democratic regimes have ruled Panama.

Further information about Panama and Noriega in particular are found in the section on US involvement in Central America.

Costa Rica provides an excellent counterpoint to the political violence in the 1970s and 80s discussed above. Costa Rica has the oldest democracy in Central America and had their first democratic elections in 1899. Two events prevented continuous democratic rule, but for the majority of time, Costa Rica has been a democracy. From 1917-1919 Federico Tinco ruled as dictator of Costa Rica and in 1948 José Figuéres led an armed revolt over election results. The Figuéres revolt lasted 44 days and resulted in more than 2,000 deaths. After victory by Figuéres, a new constitution was drafted which abolished the military and declared universal suffrage in all elections. In 1949, the Costa Rican army was dissolved. Since this time Costa Rica has had successful democratic elections.

Costa Rica was impacted by the ongoing violence in the 1970s and 80s, particularly as it borders Nicaragua, which was in conflict for much of the 1980s. The United States also pressured Costa Rica to allow Nicaraguan rebels to use the country as a base, but Costa Rica prides itself on its neutrality in conflict, especially as they have no standing army. Costa Rica also played an important role in attempting to bring about peace in Central America. Oscar Arias, president of Costa Rica from 1986-1990, created the Arias plan, to bring peaceful resolution to the conflicts in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. This plan helped resolve some of these conflicts, particularly that in Nicaragua. Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his efforts. Arias was re-elected president of Costa Rica in 2006-2010. He served as the mediator to bring the 2009 Honduran coup to a peaceful end, helping to negotiate the plan to return Honduras to democratic elections.

Resources on Costa Rica touch on a number of topics. *Costa Rica: Child in the Wind* (HC COS 2), centers on the 1986 election of Oscar Arias and includes interviews with Oscar Arias and José Figuéres. The film also provides plenty of background history for students with no prior knowledge of this nation. The video is highly recommended. *Costa Rica* (HC COS 1) is a short documentary produced by the *Christian Science Monitor* news service. It presents Costa Rica in a somewhat over-glamorized light, yet it does deal with the problems facing the tiny republic in the 1980s especially the problems created by Costa Rica's proximity to Nicaragua.

The last documentary on Costa Rica which should be mentioned is quite different from the others. *A Man, when he is a Man* (SI LA 9) discusses machismo and the subjugation of women in that country. This is a negative portrayal of contemporary Costa Rican society. This video contains mature themes, and is only appropriate for college students. Even with older students it should be handled sensitively. Teachers wishing to use this video should also be careful to point out that Costa Rican men (and Latin men in general) are not the only men who subjugate and abuse women. The stereotyping of Latin culture should be carefully avoided.

Belize has a different historical trajectory in the 1970s and 80s than the other countries in Central America. This has roots in the Belizean Colonial era, as Belize was a British, as opposed to a Spanish colony. Belize did not gain its independence from Great Britain until 1981 and is start part of the commonwealth today. Belize, called British Honduras until independence, did not suffer from the political turbulence of much of the rest of Central America. *Belize: Towards Independence* (HC BEL 1) is a documentary produced just before the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1981. It explores the uncertainties that existed during this transition from colonialism to nationhood – the presence of British troops, the threat of Guatemalan attack, the potential role of the United States, economic development, etc.

As the film mentions, one reason why Belize maintained its status as a British colony for so long was the fear of a Guatemalan invasion. Guatemala claims the territory of Belize, that is they believe that it is really part of Guatemala. Belize stayed a part of Great Britain as it was less likely that Guatemala would invade the country when British forces would be there. Belizeans feared that upon independence the Guatemalan military would invade. No agreement could be reached with Guatemala prior to



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independence, however, but Belize went ahead with independence in 1981. Guatemala formally recognized Belize's independence in 1992, although there are still periodic border disputes between the two nations. Great Britain maintains some troops in the country at the request of the Belizean government. Belize has had peaceful democratic elections since independence in 1981.

Land and Conflict

The relationship of people to land has always had a great deal of significance in Central America. Many people see the conflict over land as the root of much of the political conflict in the region. Beginning in the late 19th century with the expansion of export agriculture (especially coffee), land shifted away from small farmers toward large commercial plantations which produce for export. The concentration of fertile agricultural land in the hands of a few leads to competition for land among people in the countries. This competition has led to attempts to reform land distributions more equitably, particularly by taking land away from large corporations, which is at the root of much political violence in Central America.

Understanding the importance of land, particularly high quality agricultural land, can help students understand the root of some political conflict in Central America. *Roots of Rebellion: Land and Hunger in Central America* (DEV CA 1) explores the relationship between inequitable distribution of land and guerilla insurgencies in Central America. *Rio Blanco: Land Use in a Highland Guatemalan Village* (DEV GUA 2) is an image packet and accompanying curriculum guide designed to teach students to record geographic data, improve map-reading skills, and to list and label the countries of Central America. Issues such as rural poverty, rural to urban migration, land distribution, and farming techniques can be discussed within the context of this learning tool. The unit was produced by SPICE (Stanford University), which also created a similar, equally outstanding unit on the social and economic problems of rural El Salvador, entitled *Scarcity and Survival in El Salvador* (I ELS 6). This unit teaches students to gather data from maps, interpret charts, and graphs, and evaluate news sources, while developing an understanding of rural El Salvador and the problems of landlessness. Both are intended for the high school level. Part II of the video *Central America Today: Nations in Transition* (HC CA 11) focuses on land and agriculture as the key to contemporary economic and societal dynamics of the region.

El Crucero (DEV NIC 4) is a Sandanista produced documentary about the problems and progress of a cooperative coffee finca operating during the Sandinista government (In the mid-1980s). The film is clearly sympathetic to Sandinista reforms and critical of US embargoes against Nicaragua, but it does not romanticize the life of the rural peasant farmer. It is a useful tool for understanding the day to day struggle that is undertaken by those who live in rural poverty in Central America. *Seeing Windows* (DEV HON 1) is an excellent video which links rural poverty to urban squatter settlements, and discusses the problems of land ownership in both rural and urban contexts. The video also focuses on rural development efforts by the United Nations.

The US and Central America

The United States has been heavily involved in Central American economics and politics since many Central American countries gained independence from Spain in the 19th century. The role of the US continued to grow in importance throughout the early part of the 20th century. *Witness to History: US Intervention in Latin America* (H LA 26) is a short educational documentary about the role of the US in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. It is not comprehensive, but it covers several important historical events, and it is easy to follow. It will be especially appropriate for middle school and junior high school students.

Much of US economic policy in the region has centered on the importance of fruit exports from the region. In fact, US involvement in economics in the region was so great that the term "Banana Republic" was coined to refer to countries which operate mostly under the control of private corporations, with the cooperation of the government, for profit. Guatemala and Honduras are the two best examples of this term, as they were basically controlled by the United Fruit Company which was exporting bananas to the United States. Much of the financial impact in the United States was centered in the southeast,



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particularly the Gulf Coast region. New Orleans, LA has traditionally been a hub for economic connections with Central America, and was the base for the United Fruit Company for many years. The effects of these economic connections with Central America can be seen today in New Orleans, and many Central American immigrants live in the region due to the close economic connections and the physical proximity of the two areas.

The close economic ties between the United States and Central America lead to military involvement in the region. US military involvement in Central America in the late 1800s and early 1900s was referred to as the 'Banana Wars.' The United States conducted military operations in the Central American nations of Panama, Honduras, and Nicaragua as well as Mexico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. These military involvements were named Banana Wars as their purpose was to preserve American economic interest in the region, particularly for fruit companies such as United Fruit. The US was also intent on preserving access to and control of the Panama Canal, an important economic resource. *Crisis in Central America: The Yankee Years* (HC CA 4) is an outstanding documentary about military involvement in Central America in the first half of the 20th century. This documentary includes contemporary analysis, archival footage, and interviews with key witnesses to these interventions, covering all bands of the political spectrum.

Conflict centering around United Fruit and other US companies continued for much of the 1900s. Workers strikes were common and leftist governments, or candidates for governments attempted to reign in the fruit companies, usually to no avail. Striking workers were sometimes attacked by governments, at the request of the companies. United Fruit, backed by the US government, opposed several democratically elected political regimes in countries such as Guatemala, usually because the elected officials attempted to introduce land reform measures, which would have made it more difficult for the large companies to control all the land necessary for them to grow bananas. Many writers, both Latin American and US criticized the behavior of the companies, Central American governments, and the US government in these situations. Authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pablo Neruda, and Gore Vidal, among others, wrote critically about the actions of the fruit companies.

US involvement in the region continues into the present. During the 1970s and 80s, when many Central American republics were in conflict, the US involved itself both politically and militarily in Central American politics. The US involvement in the Nicaraguan Civil War in the 1980s is particularly well documented. *Frontline: War on Nicaragua* (HC NIC 5) traces the involvement of the Reagan administration in the civil war in Nicaragua. *Only the News that Fits* (SI CA 2) is an excellent documentary about US news coverage of events in Central America. This video raises the issues of media discretion, the pressures and limitations of news coverage, and the images that North Americas are exposed to on a daily basis. This video is highly recommended for both high school and college, and can be used in communications and journalism classes. The "Iran-Contra Affair" also involved the Nicaraguan Civil War. This scandal involved US support for the Contra's an insurgent group fighting to take control of Nicaragua from the democratically elected Sandanistas. US support for the Contras was part of an effort to eradicate Communist governments, as Reagan, US president at the time, considered the Sandanistas a communist group. As Reagan could not find funding within the US budget to provide military aid to the Contras, he looked elsewhere. At the same time, Iranian terrorists were holding several Americas hostage in Lebanon. When Iran requested the sale of arms from the United States in their war with Iraq, Reagan agreed to do so with the understanding that the US hostages would be released. This already complicated affair was rendered even more complex when it was discovered that over half of the funds received from the Iranians for the arms were being diverted to fund the Contras in their Civil War. *High Crimes and Misdemeanors* (HC US 3) is a Frontline documentary addressing the Iran-Contra Affair and it provides information not presented by commercial news sources; it also clarifies a very complex episode in history.

Another focal point of US involvement in the region during the latter part of the 20th century was the 1989 invasion of Panama. Manuel Noriega, dictator of Panama from 1983-1989, was involved with the CIA in the 1960s and 70s and also participated in drug running activities. Despite his close



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relationship with the US, relations between the US government and Noriega deteriorated, and he was deposed in a US backed coup in 1989. Noriega refused to give up political office when it became clear that free and clear election results supported his opponent. Frontline has an excellent documentary, *The Noriega Connection* (HC PAN 4) exploring the role of Noriega and the United States in the drug trade, and Noriega's involvement with the CIA. This documentary first aired in January of 1990, in the middle of the crisis. *Noticias de Noriega* (HC PAN 2) shows unedited Panamanian television news coverage of the Panamanian invasion.

US interest in Central America has also been manifested in terms of outreach by non-governmental groups and organizations. Some US groups have actively opposed US involvement in Central America. *Building Peace in the Midst of War* (SI ELS 3) follows a delegation from Cambridge, Massachusetts as they travel to their sister city in El Salvador bringing greetings, material aid, and show support for the peace process in El Salvador. *Faces of War* (SI CA 3) is a documentary about El Salvador and Nicaragua produced by the organization "Neighbor to Neighbor." It profiles several North Americans who live and work with the poor in Central America. It's a nice counterpoint to the materials about US military involvement in the region. In the same vein *Neighbors Working with Neighbors* (DEV NIC 1), a video which documents the work of hundreds of North American volunteers who have travelled to Nicaragua to work and show their solidarity with the people of Nicaragua, and the efforts of the Sandinista government during the 1980s. All of these videos would be appropriate for high school or college students.

An important issue in terms of the relationship between Central America and the US is immigration, both current immigrants and people who immigrated during periods of conflict in Central America. US immigration policy was not sympathetic to the claims of political persecution made by many Central Americans, particularly those from El Salvador and Guatemala, during the Civil Wars in those countries, complicating issues of immigration. *Refugees in our Backyard* (SI 2 Video) covers all aspects of Central American internal and international migration, including migration to the United States. It also contains relevant introductory background information to put contemporary migration patterns into an historical context. The best documentary on Central American refugees is *Common Table: Central American Refugees and the Church Response* (SI CA 5) an episode of television talk show which is sponsored by the Catholic Maryknoll order. The participants discuss the Central American refugee situation in the Long Island area, and how Christians and the Church as an institution should respond.

Fictional films are also useful resources to help students relate to the immigrant and refugee experience. Refugee camps were a common problem during the period of the most conflict in Central America. *Rosalina* (SI CA 1) is a short film about a twelve year old Salvadoran girl who lives in a refugee camp in Honduras. The production value of the film is high, and the story is poignantly understated. This would be an excellent learning tool for all levels, including middle school and junior high school students. *Maricela* (HISP 58) is a PBS "Wonderworks" episode about a young girl from El Salvador who moves with her mother into an affluent neighborhood in the United States, where her mother works as a housekeeper. This film discusses the problems which confront refugee families' from the perspectives of a thirteen year old girl. The least fortunate of Central American refugees never make it as far as the United States. Many of them end up in refugee camps inside their own countries (where they are still in danger), or in their neighboring countries of Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica.

El Norte (FF US 2) is a feature film about two Guatemalan refugees and their trek to "el norte" (The United States). This film has won critical acclaim, and is a wonderful teaching tool. It is a dramatic portrayal of both the violence in Guatemala, and the experiences of Central American refugees who are trying to find a new life in the United States. This film is very highly recommended for high school and college audiences, although high school teachers would be advised that some of the language used might be offensive.

Many additional resources in the LARC collection address issues of immigration to the US and the immigrant experience in the US. Some of these resources are specific to Central America, while



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others consider issues of Latin American immigration as a whole. For more information, please see the guide “LARC Resources on Immigration,” available for free download from the LARC website.

Twenty-first Century Central America

Central America has in many ways become more stable since the end of the civil wars and violence of the 1970s and 80s. Recent political problems, have, however resulted in an upswing in drug violence in the region. Central America is home to many gangs and drug cartels, which have resulted in violent acts throughout the region. Honduras and Guatemala are particularly racked by these problems of drug cartels, and some areas of these countries are basically under control of the drug cartels. Many governmental officials turn a blind eye to issues of violence related to drug running, as if they do not they are just as likely to suffer harm at the hands of the drug cartels. There is a fear that the increasing violence will destabilize the region and lead to the failure of democracies in the region.

Social Issues

Studies of contemporary social issues affecting people in Guatemala can be helpful to understand contemporary life in the region. Some issues currently at hand include health problems and environmental degradation.

Issues involving health care frequently surround the fact that access to health care is difficult in some areas of Central America. *Guatemala – Seeds of Health* (DEV GUA 1) is a documentary which explores health problems common in the rural highlands of Guatemala and public health efforts to fight them. The video focuses on the work of the Berhorst clinic, a unique project which trained local community members to provide health care services. The footage is relatively old and not of the highest quality, but it is still useful, especially for advanced college classes concerned with development issues.

Environmental preservation is an issue around Central America, but particularly in those regions with tropical rainforests. *Rainforest* (GE COS 1) is an excellent National Geographic documentary about the animal and plant life found in the rainforests of Costa Rica. *The Tropical Kingdom of Belize* (GE BEL 1), also by National Geographic, shows the diverse ecology of that Central American country. Like *Rainforest*, this is a beautiful portrayal of many of the animal and plant species of the region. *Costa Rica: Paradise Reclaimed* (GE COS 2) is an episode of the PBS “Nature” series in which a North American ecologist, Dan Jansen, tries to restore the ecosystem of a tropical dry forest and create a new 430 square mile national park in Costa Rica. The video explores the different animal and plant species that live in tropical dry forests. Dry forests have almost completely disappeared in Central America, because the land is valued for farming than is rain forest. This documentary explicitly discusses ecological issues, and how fragile and scarce habitats are protected. *Adventure: A Tramp in the Darién* (GE LA 9) is a PBS documentary about the tropical rainforest between Panama and Colombia. The area is accessible only on foot and by canoe. The film touches on issues including the history of the Pan American highway and indigenous communities that live on the Columbian side of the forest. The documentary brings up questions pertinent to development, ecology, and culture. It is highly recommended for all age groups.

Religion is a major aspect of social life in Central America. Religion has been tied to politics since the Colonial era. Early attempts by the Spaniards to convert indigenous peoples to Catholicism ingrained Catholic teachings into the political framework of much of Central America. Religious syncretism, or the blending of Catholicism and Maya religions, also resulted from the conversion of Maya peoples to Catholicism during the Colonial era. Blending of these two religious traditions can be seen in modern religious traditions, particularly in Chichicastenango, in the highlands of Guatemala. *Easter in Guatemala* (DF GUA 1) presents Holy Week rituals from this area. The Guatemalan festivals are a beautiful visual record of the syncretism in religious practices. The “Guatemala por dentro” series (DF GUA 4) also has a film which addresses syncretism in religious festivals in Guatemala. Religious syncretism is an interesting study of the lasting effects of colonial policies on life in Central America.



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Religion continues to be an influence in Central America in the recent past and present. Liberation theology, a term coined by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, was popular particularly among Catholics in the 1950s and 60s. Liberation theology arose as a moral reaction to the injustice within Latin America, particularly relating to poverty. Proponents of liberation theology believed the Church should work to address social issues in Latin America, such as poverty, crime, and corruption. Liberation theology was associated with leftist and Communist movements, and as such fell out of favor in the 1970s and 80s.

Liberation theology provides an interesting vantage concerning how religious movements can work within the political framework of a country to enact change. Ernesto Cardenal is a well-known liberation theologian from Nicaragua who was also a poet and priest. *Interview with Ernesto Cardenal* (HC NIC 15) is a video about Cardenal. It is in Spanish without subtitles. A set of images, *Central American Posters of the 1980s* (R NIC 1) show posters painted by Cardenal's base community from Solentiname. The images include paintings of the Stations of the Cross, as interpreted by members of the community, and political posters with religious themes. *God and Politics* (R CA 1) is an excellent documentary on the role of religion in politics in Central America. It covers liberation theology, the conservative elements of the Catholic Church, and the growth of protestant evangelical sects in the region, as well as mainstream Protestantism. It is an objective and comprehensive look at religion in Central America.

Romero (FF ELS 3), a Hollywood motion picture relating the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero, is an excellent film. Romero was a Catholic priest in El Salvador who became the archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Romero spoke out against violent repression of political dissidents and mistreatment of the poor by the El Salvadorian government and was assassinated while celebrating Mass at a small chapel. The assassination is thought to have been organized by members of an El Salvadorian death squad, supported by the government, some members of which had been trained at the School of the Americas, in the United States. Romero was an advocate for the poor and an end to human rights abuses not only in El Salvador but around Latin America. Romero was canonized by the Catholic Church. *A Question of Conscience: The Murder of the Jesuit Priests in El Salvador* (SI ELS 2) examines the role of liberation theology in El Salvador, focusing on the six Jesuit priests who were assassinated by military officials in El Salvador in 1989. Religion in Central America plays an important role in social and political issues and should not be ignored in any overarching discussion of life in Central America.

Arts and Culture in Central America

The art and culture of Central America is particularly well-known. Art is frequently connected with politics, as it is in so many areas of the world. Many Central American authors are world renowned including Carmen Naranjo Coto (Costa Rica), Joaquín Gutiérrez (Costa Rica), Carlos Luis Fallas (Costa Rica), Manlio Argueta (El Salvador), Alfredo Espino (El Salvador), Salarrué (El Salvador), Miguel Ángel Asturias (Guatemala), Otto René Castillo (Guatemala), Ramón Amaya Amador (Honduras), Roberto Sosa (Honduras), Jocanda Belli (Nicaragua), Alfonso Cortés (Nicaragua), Rubén Darío (Nicaragua), and Joaquín Pasos (Nicaragua), among others. Literary traditions in Central America are similar to those found throughout Latin America, and the Magical Realism style is common throughout the region. Resources about Central American authors include a TV Española program based on a story written by Miguel Ángel Asturias entitled *Cadáveres para la Publicidad* (LM GUA 1). The video *Nicaragua: Writing and Politics* (LM NIC 1) discusses many Nicaraguan poets, including Father Ernesto Cardenal, also featured in the *Interview with Ernesto Cardenal* (HC NIC 15).

Central America is also known for its visual artists, including Jose Antonio Velasquez (Honduras), Noe Canjura (El Salvador), and Armando Morales (Nicaragua). Visual art in Central America has both influenced and been influenced by the artistic traditions of surrounding areas, perhaps most notably by the styles of prominent Mexican artists. Several resources about art in Central America exist including *Art of Central America and Panama* (AM CA 1) an OAS film produced at the Worlds' Fair in New York in



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1965. Additional resources concerning Colonial period art are discussed above in the section on Colonial history in Central America. *Art of Mexico, Central America, and South America* (A LA 02) provides an overview of art in Central America through the 1900s. *Masses and Murals* (AM NIC 1) is not a documentary about art, but it presents many examples of political mural art from Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is a country which demonstrates the close connection between politics and art in many Central American nations. Many Sandinista's were artists or writers, so a culture of involvement in artistic traditions developed in the country. These themes can be examined to provide information concerning the relationship between art and politics throughout Central America. *Nicaragua: Writing and politics* (LM NIC 1) discusses the Sandinistas and their relationship to writers and poets. Many interviews with Sandinista and opposition writers are included. *History of a Committed Cinema* (FF NIC 5) is a short documentary produced by the Sandinistas which shows how Hollywood films have been used as tools of imperialism and how the Nicaraguan film industry can respond to these films. The video documents the making of the acclaimed Nicaraguan film, *Alsino and the Condor* (FF NIC 1). *Alsino and the Condor* is a surreal account of the time leading up to the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, the government in Nicaragua prior to the Sandinistas, told from the perspective of a young boy. *TV Sandino* (FF NIC 3) and *Popular Video Workshop in Nicaragua* (HC NIC 9) are two examples of Sandinista-produced television which demonstrate the relationship between popular culture and politics.

Artistic traditions throughout Central America are both representative of the individual countries in the region, but also broader regional traditions, and pan-Latin American traditions. Focusing on art and literature from Central America can expose students to types of art and literature with which they are not familiar.

Outside Resources:

A selection of a few outside, web-based resources, which are helpful resources concerning Central America. Many of these also contain information about a variety of other world areas which might be helpful. Please see the LARC website for additional locations with helpful resources for teaching about Latin America.

State Department Background Notes/Country Fact Sheets

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/>

CIA World Factbook

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

National Geographic Education

http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/?ar_a=1

National Endowment for the Humanities Education Website

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/>