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**THESIS**

**VARIATIONS OF U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY  
IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

by

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March 2021

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NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis utilizes a soft power framework to examine U.S. public diplomacy (PD) efforts in Central America's Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—between 2009 and 2016. During this period, the region experienced seemingly similar security, development, and migration challenges that affected U.S. foreign policy objectives; however, what would explain any variation in U.S. PD approaches to persuade or attract the host nation's public within these three countries? This thesis analyzes U.S. foreign policy targeting El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and then looks at complementary U.S. PD efforts from high-level official speeches and strategic communication (via conventional and social media). Overall, this thesis finds that variation in U.S. public diplomacy efforts across Central America's Northern Triangle between 2009 and 2016 was the result of differences in the U.S. government's prioritization of different soft power initiatives to support democracy. In El Salvador, the U.S. focused on strengthening its relationship with the executive branch; in Honduras, the U.S. centered on reestablishing the presidency after the military coup; and in Guatemala, the U.S. prioritized fighting corruption and impunity at the highest levels of government, including the presidency. Lastly, this thesis provides recommendations for the Biden administration as it seeks to attract target audiences in the Northern Triangle in conjunction with its foreign policy.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

A4P	Alliance for Progress
ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas
ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas
CAFTA–DR	Dominican Republic–Central American Free Trade Agreement
CARSI	Central American Regional Security Initiative
CICIG	International Commission for Impunity in Guatemala
DOD	Department of Defense
DOS	Department of State
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MPP	Model Police Precinct
PD	Public Diplomacy
PFG	Partnership for Growth
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
UN	United Nations
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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# I. SOFT POWER PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: VARIATIONS IN U.S. EFFORTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

In July 2014, in the midst of a humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, President Barack Obama asked Congress to approve \$3.7 billion to address the influx of more than 57,000 unaccompanied minors at the border.<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Border Control, three quarters of the children originated from three Central American states: Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, an area that perpetually experiences some of the highest homicide rates in the hemisphere and is a main thoroughfare for illicit drugs.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the request to Congress, Obama also sent a message to the citizens of these three countries: "Their parents need to know that this is an incredibly dangerous situation and it is unlikely that their children will be able to stay."<sup>3</sup> This and other statements suggest the use of public diplomacy (PD) tactics to communicate with Central American audiences with the goal of shaping policy (funding) and behavior (reducing irregular migration).

As part of this larger initiative to curtail migration, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection also launched a "Dangers Awareness Campaign," which was "an aggressive Spanish language outreach effort and an urgent call to action to community groups, the media, parents, and relatives in the U.S. and Central America to communicate the dangers

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<sup>1</sup> Chris McGreal, "Central American Leaders Meet Barack Obama to Criticise U.S. Border Policy," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2014, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/26/central-american-leaders-obama-border-policy>.

<sup>2</sup> Diana Villiers Negroponte, "The Surge in Unaccompanied Children from Central America: A Humanitarian Crisis at Our Border," *Brookings* (blog), July 2, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/07/02/the-surge-in-unaccompanied-children-from-central-america-a-humanitarian-crisis-at-our-border/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Obama Urges Congress to Approve \$4 Billion for Immigration Crisis," *Time*, July 9, 2014, <https://time.com/2971065/obama-urges-congress-to-approve-4-billion-in-funds-for-immigration-crisis/>.

of the journey.”<sup>4</sup> Within El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the U.S. Embassies pushed the awareness campaign in different ways, adopting different methods and employing different resources to implement the public diplomacy strategy. An instance of this is captured in a U.S. Government Accountability Office report:

In Honduras, the U.S. embassy’s public affairs section used social media and webinars to provide information on migration, while in Guatemala the public affairs section at the U.S. embassy there placed ads on newspapers, the radio, and buses. In El Salvador, public affairs officials from the U.S. embassy collaborated with the host government to develop its message intended to deter migration. In addition, State officials from the consular affairs sections from the U.S. embassies in Guatemala and El Salvador have also made efforts to counter misinformation.<sup>5</sup>

What explains this variation in the application of U.S. PD to convey the same message (“Protect your Children. Do not send them North”), across these three countries? More broadly, what explains variation in U.S. PD across otherwise similar contexts between 2009 and 2016?

This thesis focuses on examining those U.S. PD efforts. Public diplomacy refers to communication between an actor and a foreign audience that emphasizes behavioral outcomes in foreign policy objectives.<sup>6</sup> I seek to explore, through a soft power framework, what explains variations in U.S. PD within the countries of Central America’s Northern Triangle—Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—between 2009 and 2016. This introduction will first outline the significance of investigating U.S. PD in the region by showing that while the study and practice of PD has received increased interest, scholars have overlooked the Northern Triangle; it will then demonstrate how public diplomacy is linked to soft power. A literature review will follow detailing the existing studies on soft

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Dangers Campaign,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, July 2, 2014, <https://www.dvidshub.net/feature/dangerscampaign>; “Readout of Secretary Johnson’s Visit to Guatemala,” Department of Homeland Security, July 9, 2014, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/07/09/readout-secretary-johnsons-visit-guatemala>.

<sup>5</sup> “Central America: Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 29, 2015), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-707>.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94–109.



power public diplomacy, which I have labeled the ‘Soft Power’ and ‘Smart Power’ schools of thought; this introduction will conclude with two hypotheses, a research design, and a thesis outline.

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Understanding the variations in U.S. PD in Central America’s Northern Triangle demonstrates how the United States utilizes the public sphere to meet its foreign policy goals in oft-overlooked countries. Though PD is not a new notion, the use of it, and thus the study of it, within a state’s foreign policy objectives began to receive enhanced interest in the 1990s at the end of the Cold War and as the world’s communications networks expanded.<sup>7</sup> Then, in the 2000s, PD became “indispensable because of two early 21st-century [sic] phenomena: instantaneous, 24/7 global media and the proliferation of democratic nations.”<sup>8</sup> This change in the information environment also coincided with the United States’ shift in focus to the Middle East and the Pacific and, therefore, much of the research on U.S. PD also shifted attention to those regions (as the literature review later reveals). Scholars of U.S. PD conducted little research of the topic within Latin America, and thus, a gap in analysis is filled with this thesis that looks at Central America’s Northern Triangle.

Public diplomacy is conventionally partnered with the concept of soft power. This concept, which Joseph Nye Jr. popularized in the 1990s, describes a country’s ability to influence another state without the use of force. It is “more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument...it is also the ability to entice and attract.”<sup>9</sup> The sources of soft power stem from a country’s “culture, values, and perceptions of policy legitimacy.”<sup>10</sup> Soft power scholars therefore envision PD as a weapon in a country’s soft

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<sup>7</sup> Nye, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Colleen Graffy, “Public Diplomacy: A Practitioner’s Perspective,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 5 (January 1, 2009): 791, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764208326524>.

<sup>9</sup> Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 95.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 32, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=850676>.

power arsenal. With strong economic, military, and cultural connections between the United States and Central America, soft power PD offers an appropriate platform on which to base the analysis of variations in U.S. public diplomacy.

The use of PD posits that communicating with foreign audiences plays a part in foreign policy objectives. Soft power research, however, is not consistent when dealing with PD. The following literature review will outline these debates in soft power PD and identifies the gap in scholarly work on U.S. PD in Central America's Northern Triangle.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

When seeking to explain variations in U.S. soft power PD, scholars are divided into two schools of thought: Soft Power and Smart Power. The first sees PD as purely a tool of a country's soft power; that is, a country will only use public diplomacy when it is looking to attract or persuade via cultural or political values. The second school views PD as a complementary tool to a country's hard power; Smart Power PD thus plays a role in a country's hard power initiatives.<sup>11</sup> The literature review will present the two schools of thought and common explanatory factors via three levels of analysis: international, domestic, and individual. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the domestic and individual levels of analysis.

#### **1. Public Diplomacy Definition (using the framework of soft power)**

Scholars who use the concept of soft power see public diplomacy as two-way engagements between an actor and a foreign audience; this emphasizes behavioral outcomes in foreign policy objectives.<sup>12</sup> Nye sees PD as a communicative instrument to attract the publics of other countries.<sup>13</sup> There is a recognition of an "inherent and interdependent connection between public diplomacy and soft power, both of which point

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 100–109.

<sup>12</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power"; Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas, eds., *Trials of Engagement: The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy*, vol. 6 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=717455>; Jan Melissen, "The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice," in *The New Public Diplomacy*, ed. Jan Melissen (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 3–27, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931_1).

<sup>13</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power."

to an understanding of world politics beyond interstate relations by accentuating the role of public as well as non-military means to achieve desirable results.”<sup>14</sup> Jan Melissen explains that the act of PD is not “a uniquely stately activity, even though it stresses the practice of states. Large and small non-state actors...develop public policies of their own.”<sup>15</sup> Actors in public diplomacy might use broadcasting, subsidize cultural exports like movies and music, and sponsor exchanges that, as Fisher and Lucas put it, “influence the behavior of communities overseas.”<sup>16</sup> This thesis acknowledges that there are many actors or organizations who practice PD, but it will only concentrate on official state actors, specifically the high-level government officials, such as presidents and ambassadors, who set agendas for foreign policy.

Additionally, views of PD have changed over time, especially as more people gained access to the internet in the post-Cold War era either because of democratization or because of infrastructure. Many scholars label this transformation as either “New Public Diplomacy” or “Public Diplomacy 2.0.”<sup>17</sup>

Key to understanding PD as an element of soft power in both schools of thought is the acknowledgment that the evolution of technology affects how actors attract foreign audiences. As the world entered the twenty-first century, a greater global population had access to information. Nye calls this the “paradox of plenty”<sup>18</sup> and, given that information is ever-present—i.e., on televisions, computers, and smart phones—those that can control

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<sup>14</sup> Efe Sevin, “Understanding Soft Power Through Public Diplomacy in Contrasting Polities,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, ed. Naren Chitty et al. (Routledge, 2016), 62, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315671185>.

<sup>15</sup> Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> Fisher and Lucas, *Trials of Engagement*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth. A. Osgood and Brian Craig Etheridge, eds., *United States and Public Diplomacy: New Directions in Cultural and International History* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=635073>; Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy.”

<sup>18</sup> Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.”

narratives and a public's attention, possess power.<sup>19</sup> This then allows the use of PD to become "an end in itself."<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Soft Power Public Diplomacy: Role in Foreign Policy

Though the scholars in the first school of thought, Soft Power PD, make use of Nye's concept of soft power to study public diplomacy, they argue it is too focused on the dominant power actors appealing to foreign audiences. Fisher and Lucas write, "the future of public diplomacy will have to go beyond Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power...real engagement will be a process of genuine involvement, rather than a more attractive sounding method of trying to garner followers."<sup>21</sup> Rather, these scholars see public diplomacy as a "two-way transnational exchange of ideas"<sup>22</sup> that relies on both relaying a state's message as well as listening to the foreign audiences. This means there is a dependence on the foreign country's culture and history. As an example, the United States "will struggle to succeed [in Latin America] until there is a tacit shift in emphasis that jettisons long-held beliefs about U.S. superiority and accepts the notions of equivalence and receptivity."<sup>23</sup>

Researchers in the Soft Power PD school of thought provide analysis of public diplomacy and soft power by controlling for the instruments of hard power. For example, Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaka Horiuchi argue that foreign public opinion of U.S. foreign policy issues—i.e., those that are prominent in the news cycle—affects not only how the United States sets its agenda but also how that foreign leader establishes his or her own foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> To simplify, a country will take into account the public opinion of another country when creating its foreign policies.

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<sup>19</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power*, 125.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher and Lucas, *Trials of Engagement*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Bevan Sewell, "Competing Narratives: U.S. Public Diplomacy And The Problematic Case Of Latin America," *Trials of Engagement*, January 1, 2011, 161–80.

<sup>23</sup> Sewell, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, "In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for U.S. Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (2012): 555–86.

### 3. Smart Power Public Diplomacy: Role in Foreign Policy

As a response to critiques in the early 2000s, Nye led a separate school of thought within the soft power scholarship and adopted the term “Smart Power” to explain that neither soft power nor hard power alone will create effective foreign policy.<sup>25</sup> Elements of soft power, including PD, complement the instruments of hard power. He writes, “Conventional wisdom has always held that the state with the largest military prevails, but in an information age it may be the state (or non-states) with the best story that wins.”<sup>26</sup> This “best story” requires credibility, which “is as important with the threat or actual use of force as it is with persuading others to accept your viewpoint as being in their general interest.”<sup>27</sup> Smart Power PD will lose credibility if it contradicts hard power initiatives.

Public diplomacy becomes increasingly important when other countries democratize or when countries become interlinked politically and economically. As examples, Nye points to the democratization of Mexico and Turkey in the early 2000s.<sup>28</sup> As the United States sought international backing for the Iraq War, public support for the war in the two respective countries was pivotal since the elected officials could now be held accountable. What was once a two-actor relationship between diplomats now needed to include a third: the foreign public. Here, an improved public opinion of the United States would lead voters to support politicians who supported the United States.

Public diplomacy, however, is not only about boosting public opinion; it is about engagement. Jan Melissen writes, “in regions characterized by a great deal of economic and/or political interdependence as well as a high level of interconnection at the level of

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<sup>25</sup> It is up for debate of whether Nye coined the term “Smart Power.” In 2004, Suzanne Nossel, who was Deputy to Ambassador Richard Holbrooke at the United Nations during the Clinton administration, wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* titled “Smart Power;” however, Nye claims to have come up with it in 2003. Regardless, many Smart Power researchers utilize Nye’s work as a basis for their research.

<sup>26</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Giles Scott-Smith, “Soft Power, U.S. Public Diplomacy and Global Risk,” in *Trials of Engagement: The Future of Us Public Diplomacy*, ed. Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 100, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=717455>; Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>;

<sup>28</sup> Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 99.

civil society, public diplomacy has become essential in diplomatic relations.”<sup>29</sup> A country looking to wield its economic power will use the close relationships that extend beyond diplomats and to the citizens of the two countries.

#### **4. Between the Two Schools of Thought: Explaining Variations in Public Diplomacy**

Scholars use three levels of analysis—international, domestic, and individual—of public diplomacy to explain variations in its practice. Variables in all three levels factor into the differences of a country’s PD. At the international level, scholars from both schools of thought agree that how a state perceives and measures its and others’ soft power when attracting foreign publics causes variations in PD.<sup>30</sup> The domestic level analysis looks at variations within the state—from infrastructure to institutional strength to shared democratic values. Individual analysis focus on the actors who practice PD. Given the smaller scope of this thesis, the following sections will only emphasize the domestic level and then narrowly on the individual level to explain how public diplomacy might vary over time and between regions.

##### *a. Domestic Levels of Analysis*

While the Soft Power and Smart Power schools of thought in public diplomacy widely share similar views on the variations of the topic at the international level, they differ slightly at the domestic level. Both recognize that communication technologies and the media within a specific country affects a state’s PD. For example, scholars cite how the United States used satellite television in a PD campaign in Egypt that would compete with

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<sup>29</sup> Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy,” 11.

<sup>30</sup> Melissen; Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power*.

*Al-Jazeera's* information.<sup>31</sup> Other scholars cite a country's overall media landscape—including its press freedom and access to the internet—to explain variance.<sup>32</sup>

Soft Power public diplomacy research often focuses on United States diplomatic narrative and the subsequent anti- or pro-American sentiment. Sewell argues that U.S. PD should account for historical military interventions when engaging with foreign audiences.<sup>33</sup> This would mean that a varied history between two nations would lead to a variation in PD. In another example, Sevin looks at the different public diplomacy efforts of the United States, Russia, and Iran, and argues that a country's domestic institutions and values change a country's public diplomacy campaigns or tactics.<sup>34</sup>

The Smart Power school of thought largely negates the importance of history and focuses on how certain domestic organizations, like the U.S. Department of State (DOS) or the Department of Defense (DOD), execute PD and how domestic elements of hard power will cause the United States to vary its PD.<sup>35</sup> For example, Giles Scott-Smith writes of the economic downturn in the 1970s, which when the “U.S. faced damaged prestige, a weakening economic position, and the need to engage with others to solve common problems,”<sup>36</sup> the DOS organized educational and cultural exchanges “to stimulate institutional development.”<sup>37</sup> The DOD, a hard power element, also takes part in U.S. public diplomacy. Most scholars will write of U.S. military efforts to “win hearts and minds” in Iraq and Afghanistan, but additionally, programs like military educational exchanges are used as a public diplomacy tool for democratic political socialization. Carol

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<sup>31</sup> Craig Hayden, “Scope, Mechanism, and Outcome: Arguing Soft Power in the Context of Public Diplomacy,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 331–57, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2015.8>; Marwa Fikry Abdel Samei, “Public Diplomacy and the Clash of Satellites,” *Media and Communication; Lisbon* 4, no. 2 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.17645/mac.v4i2.385>.

<sup>32</sup> Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative”; Ernest J. Wilson, “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 110–24.

<sup>33</sup> Sewell, “Competing Narratives.”

<sup>34</sup> Sevin, “Understanding Soft Power Through Public Diplomacy in Contrasting Polities.”

<sup>35</sup> Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power*; Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative.”

<sup>36</sup> Scott-Smith, “Soft Power, U.S. Public Diplomacy and Global Risk,” 111.

<sup>37</sup> Scott-Smith, 111.

Atkinson writes that if the United States fosters strong democratic values through its military exchanges, it will create democratic norms where militaries support its citizens rather than only its political leaders.<sup>38</sup>

Nye explains Smart Power public diplomacy does not occur in a single actor state; but rather, a country's PD can change depending on another country's PD or public affairs (i.e., domestic) efforts.<sup>39</sup> He writes, "there can be joint gains from coordination of public diplomacy programs."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the United States might vary its PD efforts as a response to a state's or non-state actor's public diplomacy.

***b. Individual Level of Analysis***

To understand variations in public diplomacy, research focuses on the individuals who set the tone and agenda for a country's soft power initiatives. In the case of the United States, scholars mainly study the presidents, secretaries of state, and ambassadors. One president might treat soft power, and therefore his or her PD, differently than the next president. The most common way scholars examine the individual level of public diplomacy is by evaluating high-level visits and public statements as well as published strategies, initiatives, and testimonies.<sup>41</sup> In the Soft Power PD school of thought, they often look at only public statements that speak about soft power elements, such as shared values and culture.<sup>42</sup> Another group of Soft Power PD scholars provide evidence that high-level

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<sup>38</sup> Carol Atkinson, *Military Soft Power: Public Diplomacy through Military Educational Exchanges* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1728029>.

<sup>39</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 107.

<sup>40</sup> Nye, 107.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power"; Benjamin E. Goldsmith, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Kelly Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion? Identifying the Effect of High-Level Visits," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, September 3, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3566347>; David Ryan, "The Dots above the Detail: The Myopia of Meta-Narrative in George W. Bush's Declarative 'War of Ideas,'" in *Trials of Engagement: The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy*, ed. Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 87–98, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=717455>.

<sup>42</sup> Ryan, "The Dots above the Detail: The Myopia of Meta-Narrative in George W. Bush's Declarative 'War of Ideas.'"



foreign visits that include PD engagements improve overall foreign public opinion.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, it is the act of the high-level visit, not the message the individual is transmitting, that increases public opinion of the leader; thus, understanding why a high-level diplomat visits a foreign country explains variance.

Contrastingly, Smart Power scholars look at how individuals speak about security or economic challenges in the public sphere to explain variance in public diplomacy.<sup>44</sup> Nye, for instance, analyzes President George Bush's use of the word "axis of evil" to refer to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and how "foreigners reacted against lumping together disparate diplomatic situations under a moralistic label."<sup>45</sup> In Smart Power PD, the way an individual prioritizes the act of communicating to attract can explain variation in the overall application of public diplomacy.

## **5. Evaluation of the Explanations of Variations in Public Diplomacy**

Explanations of variations in public diplomacy as an element of soft power have their respective strengths and weaknesses. Completely separating Soft Power PD from hard power allows the simplification of explanatory variables. It keeps the practice of PD to organizations and actors whose primary goal is to shape behavior through cultural or political values. This school of thought also accounts for historical international relationships and how they can affect present-day variances in public diplomacy. However, given the interconnection of U.S. security cooperation and economic initiatives in Central America's Northern Triangle, this might not explain variations of U.S. PD in the region.

Smart Power public diplomacy offers a means to analyze PD as an element of soft power in conjunction with hard power initiatives. Though difficult to measure, scholars have provided evidence how a country uses smart and hard power together to explain variances in public diplomacy. This would perhaps explain why, during the border crisis of 2014, President Obama linked a soft power message ("families should not send their

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<sup>43</sup> Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?"

<sup>44</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 104; Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power."

<sup>45</sup> Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 104.

children north) with the hard power action of increasing security at the border. Though Smart Power scholars speak to the importance of understanding target audiences, they disregard the potential importance of how the history of U.S. military and economic interventions in a region affects how an audience receives current messaging.<sup>46</sup>

Across the board, scholars of soft power public diplomacy give credence to presidents and secretaries of state to set the PD agenda. Scholarly work, however, largely overlooks Latin America in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, I have yet to find a PD analysis that mentions the countries in Central America's Northern Triangle. Given the economic, military, and cultural ties between the United States and Central America, further research should be done utilizing aspects of PD in both the Soft Power and Smart Power schools of thought to explain the variations of U.S. public diplomacy in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS OF VARIATIONS IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

The following sections provide potential explanations and hypotheses to answer the question of “What explains variations in U.S. public diplomacy within the countries of Central America's Northern Triangle—Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—between 2009 and 2016?”

*Hypothesis 1: Soft Power factors explain the variation in U.S. public diplomacy.*

Given that the United States was historically heavily involved in the Central American politics and their respective economies and militaries from the twentieth century onward, this hypothesis would build on the work that history and U.S. domestic institutional values will vary its public diplomacy across location and time.

*Hypothesis 2: Smart Power factors explains the variation in U.S. public diplomacy.*

Using Nye's version of Smart Power public diplomacy, the U.S.'s twenty-first century economic and military ties with the three countries would affect how the United States attracts the foreign audiences in each country.

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<sup>46</sup> Nye; Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy.”

## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis utilizes comparative case studies to analyze the variations of U.S. public diplomacy in Central America's Northern Triangle. Looking at the question, there are essentially two combined elements that will exhibit variation: time and country. Therefore, the thesis accounts for the variations during the Obama administration as well as across the three countries.

To analyze both domestic and individual factors, I use secondary historical sources and government data to analyze political stability, economic ties, and military ties from 2009 to 2016. The congressional research service and the defense department keep record of economic and military partnerships. I use source material such as presidential speeches, department of state media releases, and congressional testimony, social media posts and so forth, to determine the existence and extent of soft power public diplomacy prioritization. The state department keeps record of presidential visits to other countries and speeches on foreign policy. Furthermore, the state department keeps a publicly available database of released Freedom of Information Act documents, which provides evidence of how and why DOS personnel made policy decisions during the research period. I also look at local media sources to understand the messaging and foreign policy during that time in the specific countries. Lastly, I use secondary sources to examine the country's information environment, which includes information infrastructure and degree of press freedom.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The thesis is divided into five chapters: an introduction, three that focus El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala and then a fifth chapter that provides a conclusive analysis and implications for the United States in the future. Within each case study, I provide information on U.S. foreign policy priorities, I analyze official visits and speeches from high-level officials, and then I examine strategic communication campaigns. These chapters should answer the questions, "What caused the variation between 2009 and 2016 in this country?" The last chapter will conclude with condensed analysis and then include policy recommendations.

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## **II. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN EL SALVADOR: 2009 TO 2016**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

When Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes traveled to Washington, D.C., for his first official visit in 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama said, “My main goal today is communicating how interested the United States is in continuing to be an equal partner with El Salvador...a relationship built on mutual interest and mutual respect.”<sup>47</sup> Between 2009 and 2016, these mutual interests would primarily focus on three issues: combatting crime, increasing economic viability, and reducing irregular migration. At any given time, these concerns would shift in priority, but rarely did policy focus on challenges outside of those three realms. From a public diplomacy (PD) perspective, the United States’ communication would reflect these three issues as well as concentrate on building legitimacy for the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship as El Salvador transitioned in 2009 to a leftist government with historic revolutionary ties.

This chapter will analyze U.S. PD efforts in El Salvador between 2009 and 2016. First, I discuss U.S. foreign policy priorities and then look at official U.S. PD via official speeches from the White House, the U.S. secretary of state, and the U.S. ambassador. Next, I analyze U.S. PD strategic communication campaigns, focusing on the three nodes of communication: the sender (i.e., the United States), the receiver (i.e. Salvadorans) and the messenger (i.e., communications technology and the media). Finally, I conclude that PD transitioned from building legitimacy for the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship to one primarily focused on promoting economic investment and democracy as well as deterring irregular migration through building Salvadoran national pride and informing Salvadorans of the dangers of traveling north.

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<sup>47</sup> “Remarks by President Obama and President Funes of El Salvador after Meeting,” The White House, March 8, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-funes-el-salvador-after-meeting>.

## B. U.S. POLICY IN EL SALVADOR: 2009 TO 2016

The U.S. policy priorities of combatting crime, increasing economic viability, and reducing irregular migration were not new agenda items for the Obama administration; however, it did attempt to tackle the issues in a different manner. With security, the United States rebranded the Mérida Initiative, a joint Mexico-Central American-United States security plan, into the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). This security package separated Central America from Mexico “to support immediate law enforcement operations,”<sup>48</sup> emphasizing counter narcotics operations (the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement foreign aid account accounted for 66 percent of appropriations). Between 2009 and 2012, El Salvador received 16.3 percent of the approximately \$468 million given to Central America.<sup>49</sup> The Department of State’s (DOS) International Narcotics and Law Enforcement and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) targeted programs that moved El Salvador away from its *mano dura*—i.e., hard handed—policing to ones that pursued increasing public trust in police through the Model Police Precinct (MPP) program and assisting at-risk youth via education and employment opportunities.<sup>50</sup> The United States carried out these initiatives in conjunction with a Funes-led truce between the Salvadoran government and *maras*, or gangs such as MS-13 and Calle 18. Results varied across the programs. For example,

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<sup>48</sup> Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress” CRS Report No. 41731 (Congressional Research Service, December 17, 2015), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Meyer and Seelke; William R. Brownfield, “Regional Security Cooperation: An Examination of the Central America Regional Security Initiative and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative,” Pub. L. No. HHRG-113-FA07, § House Foreign Affairs Committee - Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 7 (2013), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20130619/101032/HHRG-113-FA07-Wstate-BrownfieldW-20130619.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Brownfield, “Regional Security Cooperation: An Examination of the Central America Regional Security Initiative and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative”; Susan Berk-Seligson et al., “Impact Evaluation of USAID’s Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama,” The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) (Vanderbilt University, October 2014), [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi/Regional\\_Report\\_v12d\\_final\\_W\\_120814.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi/Regional_Report_v12d_final_W_120814.pdf).

homicides decreased and public satisfaction in the police increased;<sup>51</sup> however, rumors also surfaced of Salvadoran government death squads targeting suspected gang members.<sup>52</sup> By 2014, El Salvador's murder rate increased to approximately nine a day from five in 2013, negating hopes that the country had found a solution to its crime problem.

Beyond security, the United States also sought to work with El Salvador to increase economic opportunities in-country, thereby also preventing irregular migration. In 2005, the United States signed the Central American–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which, according to then-U.S. President George W. Bush's speech at the signing event, would enhance opportunities for Central Americans in their home countries so that "it's less likely that someone looking for a job will try to come to this country illegally."<sup>53</sup> In 2011, Obama took the free trade agreement one step further and extended the focus on economic development with the Partnership for Growth (PFG). This U.S.-funded program looked to "accelerate and sustain broad-based, inclusive economic growth by mitigating two principal binding constraints: (1) high-levels of crime and insecurity, and (2) a weak tradeables sector."<sup>54</sup> El Salvador was one of four countries globally selected for the program, which included 20 jointly identified goals, ranging from improving criminal justice effectiveness to raising tax revenues to enhancing the quality of education.<sup>55</sup>

The PFG was not the only initiative that sought to bring about increased economic vitality to El Salvador. In 2007, the U.S. foreign assistance agency Millennium Challenge

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<sup>51</sup> William L. Marcy, "The End of Civil War, the Rise of Narcotrafficking and the Implementation of the Merida Initiative in Central America," *International Social Science Review* 89, no. 1 (2014): 1–36; Berk-Seligson et al., "Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama."

<sup>52</sup> Marcy, "The End of Civil War, the Rise of Narcotrafficking and the Implementation of the Merida Initiative in Central America."

<sup>53</sup> "President Signs CAFTA-DR," The White House, August 2, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/08/20050802-2.html>.

<sup>54</sup> James Jones et al., "Performance Evaluation of the Partnership for Growth in El Salvador," E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project (United States Agency for International Development, March 20, 2017), [https://sv.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/202/Final\\_Evaluation\\_English.pdf](https://sv.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/202/Final_Evaluation_English.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Jones et al.

Corporation (MCC) signed a five-year compact with El Salvador. The grant, worth \$461 million and concentrated in El Salvador's Northern Zone, "among other investments in community infrastructure, education and business development, the Northern Transnational Highway that had been promised to the people of the Northern Zone for over 50 years."<sup>56</sup> By 2012, according an MCC release, dairy farmers increased their output, 220 kilometers of road were either rehabilitated or newly constructed, and 17,000 farmers or other producers received technical assistance and equipment.<sup>57</sup> In 2013, El Salvador signed another five-year compact, worth \$277 million, this time seeking to tackle the country's low productivity.<sup>58</sup>

The PFG would continue in El Salvador until 2015 when the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America fully replaced it (though there was some overlap in initiatives). Meant as a broader economic plan, the strategy sought to address challenges with whole-of-government and whole-of-region approaches that encouraged "private sector investment and combine [d] the financial, intellectual, and human resources of North American governments, Colombia, the European Union, and multilateral development banks."<sup>59</sup> While the release of the strategy coincided with the surge of irregular migration, it in fact, was not created as a response to the growth. Rather, its goals were to reduce the existing divisions in programs and decision making amongst U.S. agencies in country as well as across borders, including more coordination between CARS, USAID, DOS, DOD, and private donors.<sup>60</sup> The strategy also pursued more integration with the other Northern

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<sup>56</sup> Berk-Seligson et al., "Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama."

<sup>57</sup> "MCC Completes Successful Five-Year Compact with El Salvador," Millennium Challenge Corporation, September 21, 2012, <https://www.mcc.gov/news-and-events/release/press-release-09212012-elsalvadorecloseout>.

<sup>58</sup> "MCC Board Approves Compact with El Salvador, Discusses Transparency and Open Data," Millennium Challenge Corporation, September 12, 2013, <https://www.mcc.gov/news-and-events/release/release-091213-mcc-board-approves>.

<sup>59</sup> "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America" (The White House, 2014), [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central\\_america\\_strategy.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central_america_strategy.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Peter J. Meyer, "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress" CRS Report No. R44812 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 12, 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44812>.



Triangle countries via a Central American-led common vision, called the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P).<sup>61</sup>

### **C. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN EL SALVADOR**

The United States varied its public diplomacy from 2009 to 2016 to complement U.S. policy priorities in El Salvador to combat crime, increase economic viability, and reduce irregular migration. First, the United States moved from communicating legitimacy for the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship—and appeared to give precedence over the other Central American nations—to a narrative focused on economic investment, democratic processes, and educational opportunities. Second, with both the change in U.S. strategy in 2014 as well as changes in Salvadoran telecommunications, the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador began to integrate its communications more with the U.S. mission in El Salvador, especially in social media and news management.

The following section on U.S. PD efforts will look at how U.S. officials changed the language of their public speeches about El Salvador using examples from the U.S. secretary of state, the U.S. president, and the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador. Then, by analyzing the Salvadoran information environment in conjunction with U.S. PD efforts, I will explain how and why the United States used communication campaigns to inspire national pride (*#SueñoSalvadoreño*) in Salvadorans and to educate them on the risks (“Dangers of the Journey”) of immigrating north to the United States.

#### **1. U.S. Public Diplomacy: Official Speeches**

On June 1, 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the inauguration of President Funes. During her joint press conference with Funes after the event, Clinton “committed to reengaging with Latin America” and underscored commonalities between Obama and Funes.<sup>62</sup> She spoke of a “new approach to our hemisphere, based on principles of shared responsibility and mutual respect...the United States stands ready to assist you

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<sup>61</sup> The White House, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.”

<sup>62</sup> “Remarks With El Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes,” U.S. Department of State, June 1, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/06/124388.htm>.

and your new government,” and then later concluded, “We want to see rule of law. We want to see governments working together. But more than that, Mr. President [Funes], we want to see people-to-people interaction”<sup>63</sup> Because Funes was the first elected president from the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), which until the mid-90s had been a leftist guerilla group, doubt existed as to whether the United States would maintain close ties with El Salvador.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Clinton’s words promised that the two countries would continue working together to combat crime and drug trafficking as well as increase economic and educational opportunities. In a March 2010 e-mail to Clinton from Arturo Valenzuela, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, he addressed U.S. desire to build legitimacy for the relationship amid concerns that Funes’ own party was questioning the closeness.<sup>65</sup> He wrote, “An overwhelming majority of Salvadorans have a positive view of the U.S. and do not see a close associate with the U.S. as negative. We should not distance ourselves from Funes because a group of hardline elements within the FMLN hold his association with us against him. Rather, we should publicly and forcefully build on that close relationship.”<sup>66</sup> This document reflects that the United States saw a positive correlation between Salvadoran public perception and a stronger U.S.-El Salvador relationship.

Obama then reiterated this objective to build legitimacy when he visited El Salvador in March 2011, saying, “[Funes] articulated a vision of economic growth and social progress that is inclusive of all segments of Salvadoran society. And I want to make it clear today that the United States wants to be a partner with El Salvador in this process.”<sup>67</sup> As his only stop in Central America during his first Latin American tour—and

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<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of State.

<sup>64</sup> Meyer and Seelke, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress.”

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras, “Honduran Coup: Sitrep 3,” June 28, 2009, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov). This e-mail as well as all other e-mails referenced in this thesis were released through the U.S. State Department Freedom of Information Act Virtual Reading room located at <https://www.foia.gov>

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras.

<sup>67</sup> “The President’s News Conference with President Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena of El Salvador in San Salvador, El Salvador” (Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents, March 22, 2011), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201100197/pdf/DCPD-201100197.pdf>.

his only stop to the Northern Triangle during his entire presidency—Obama’s visit alone signified a “high-profile photo-op for Funes, meant to strengthen his legitimacy especially vis-à-vis the FMLN.”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Obama also accompanied Funes to the tomb of human rights activist Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who Salvadoran government forces assassinated ahead of the civil war in 1980. The visit to Romero’s grave was a first for a U.S. president and though Obama gave no remarks, it was important given U.S. involvement to train and fund the Salvadoran government during the 1980s. When reporters asked why Obama visited the tomb, Assistant National Security Advisor, Ben Rhodes, gave little information and answered, “Monseñor Romero is a hero for many people in the Americas.”<sup>69</sup> According to some reports, while the visit to the tomb demonstrated U.S. prioritization of human rights, some members of the Salvadoran public received it differently. In an interview with the Pulitzer Center, the editor-in-chief for *El Faro* digital magazine said, “Obama’s visit (to Romero’s tomb) is an important symbol because it creates spaces and perhaps sends the message that the United States believes that justice is possible in El Salvador...but symbols are not enough.”<sup>70</sup>

Even if some Salvadorans saw Obama’s visit to Romero’s tomb as a symbol that was “not enough,” the United States continued to pay homage to Romero’s legacy as part of their PD efforts. For example, the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Mari Carmen Aponte visited the Romero Center at the University of Central America in 2011.<sup>71</sup> Like Obama during his visit to the tomb, Aponte did not give any remarks during her visit. Four years later in 2015, when Obama released a statement on the beatification of Romero, the administration’s message walked a tightrope when addressing the

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<sup>68</sup> Héctor Perla and Héctor Cruz-Feliciano, “The Twenty-First-Century Left in El Salvador and Nicaragua: Understanding Apparent Contradictions and Criticisms,” *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 3 (May 1, 2013): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X13480932>.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia Carías and Gabriel Labrador Aragón, “Obama Se Guardó Sus Pensamientos al Visitar Tumba de Monseñor Romero,” [Obama guards his thoughts during visit to Monseñor Romero tomb] *elfaro*, March 22, 2011, <https://elfaro.net/es/201103/noticias/3803/Obama-se-guardó-sus-pensamientos-al-visitar-tumba-de-monseñor-Romero.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> “Salvadorans Question Obama on Anniversary of Romero’s Death,” Pulitzer Center, March 24, 2011, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/salvadorans-question-obama-anniversary-romeros-death-0>.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “Embajadora Aponte Visita UCA,” Facebook, July 6, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.216807841690561.50599.147858435252169>.

assassinated archbishop Romero. Obama's release says, "He was a wise pastor and a courageous man who persevered in the face of opposition from extremes on *both sides* [emphasis added]."72 The United States saw that legacy from the ten-year civil in El Salvador and, especially with an FMLN president, the United States decided to connect with the public via these symbolic visits; however, the United States also could not give the perception that it was at fault for the atrocities committed during the civil war.

Neither the U.S. president nor the secretary of state would visit El Salvador again before the end of 2016. This could perhaps have been because the United States concluded it had established legitimacy for the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship to both key decision makers and the Salvadoran public. Moreover, it could have been because the heightened attention on El Salvador potentially hindered other relations in the region. Before the Obama visit to El Salvador, Maria Otero, Undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, met with Eduardo Stein, former Vice President of Guatemala and head of the Truth Commission for Honduras. Otero wrote to Clinton saying, "[Stein] reports that the [President of the United States] trip to El Salvador and the decision to make it solely a bilateral meeting is receiving a negative reading in the Central American region. Stein states that the U.S.'s 'favorite treatment' to El Salvador also extends to supposed preferred treatment in financial and political support to that country."73 Clinton's response is redacted, but based on the fact that Obama met with only Salvadorans during his visit, the United States decided to continue to prioritize the bilateral Salvadoran relationship, both through public diplomacy and in funding, until the release of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America and the border crisis of 2014.

After the presidential visit to El Salvador, official speeches from the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Mari Carmen Aponte show how the United States transitioned from focusing on the legitimacy of the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship to focusing on economic investment, security partnerships, and democratic processes. For example, when

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<sup>72</sup> Administration of Barack Obama, 2015, "Statement on the Beatification of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez," *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents*, May 23, 2015, 1-1.

<sup>73</sup> Maria Otero, "Fw: POTUS Visit to El Salvador," February 24, 2011, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

Aponte returned to El Salvador in 2012 after being gone for six months,<sup>74</sup> her first speech highlighted the recent accomplishments of the MCC compact as well as emphasized the U.S.’s commitment to jointly combatting transnational crime.<sup>75</sup> Two years later in 2014, the United States was one of the last countries to recognize the presidency of Salvador Sánchez Cerén, who had been Funes’s vice president. In her speech she said, “There are processes that have not yet been accomplished and those need to be observed...we ask for your patience.”<sup>76</sup> Finally, in her last speech as U.S. ambassador in 2016, Aponte primarily centered on the dangers of political polarization and corruption as well as creating space for private investors to work with the Salvadoran government.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, the content of Aponte’s speeches did not focus on reducing irregular migration, but rather, they emphasized working together to combat the factors that cause migration: crime and lack of economic opportunities.

## **2. U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Communication**

Most of the messaging from the White House to the Salvadoran public post-2014, however, would center on irregular migration. Then-Vice President Joe Biden met with the three Northern Triangle presidents jointly many times between 2014 and 2016, and during his first press conference in the wake of the border crisis, Biden spoke of a “shared responsibility” between all involved nations to address irregular migration. He also

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<sup>75</sup> Al Kamen, “Mari Carmen Aponte Confirmed as Ambassador to El Salvador,” *Washington Post* (blog), June 14, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/post/mari-carmen-aponte-confirmed-as-ambassador-to-el-salvador/2012/06/14/gJQApUbAdV\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/post/mari-carmen-aponte-confirmed-as-ambassador-to-el-salvador/2012/06/14/gJQApUbAdV_blog.html). President Obama had appointed Aponte under a temporary recess appointment in 2010. Fifteen months later in December 2011, U.S. Senate Republicans sought to block, through a filibuster, her official appointment to El Salvador because of concerns over an op-ed she wrote supporting gay rights as well as a past boyfriend who was a Cuban spy. Though the filibuster was not successful, Aponte was absent from El Salvador during the appointment process; “Embajadora de Estados Unidos, Mari Carmen Aponte Llegó Hoy al País” [U.S. Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte arrived today to country] (San Salvador: La Prensa Gráfica Noticias de El Salvador, June 20, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWjBAOzYQ7o>.

<sup>76</sup> “Embajadora de Estados Unidos Aseguró Que Relaciones Con El Salvador Seguirán Firmes” [U.S. Ambassador ensured that relations with El Salvador will firmly continue] (Telenoticias 21, March 20, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHSe2ni2-0E>.

<sup>77</sup> “Embajadora de EEUU Concluye Su Trabajo En El Salvador” [U.S. Ambassador concludes her work in El Salvador] (Noticiero Hechos de El Salvador, February 5, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2u3caJ9Ii8>.

discussed how governments “agreed to work to counter and correct the misinformation smugglers are propagating about U.S. immigration policy, and discourage families from sending their children on this perilous journey.”<sup>78</sup> Even though Aponte did not center her public speeches on it, this statement thus shows why, the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador would focus its strategic communications on reducing irregular migration, via the media and social media, beginning in 2014.

The following section on U.S. PD efforts in El Salvador on strategic communication analyzes three key nodes of effective communication: the sender (i.e., the United States), the receiver (i.e., Salvadorans) and the messenger (i.e., communications technology and the media). Each of these three nodes changed between 2009 to 2016. For the United States, its communications became more direct and active via two campaigns: “Dangers of the Journey” and *#SueñoSalvadoreño* (Salvadoran Dream). For the Salvadoran public, while they still heavily relied on TV and radio for information, they also started to use the internet more. As for communication technologies and the press, while social media and internet access became more available, members of the media actually experienced a reduction in press freedom by 2015. This reduction occurred because of two reasons: first, because of government intimidation towards journalists who conducted investigations of government affairs; and second, coercive pressure from gangs.

As the smallest (6.3 million people in 2014) and most densely populated country (73.4 percent of the population is urbanized) in Central American, Salvadorans mainly receive information via television and radio.<sup>79</sup> According to the 2013 Latinobarometer survey, 64 percent of Salvadorans watch one to four hours of television a day and more than half listen to at least one hour of radio.<sup>80</sup> This would explain why, in 2010, the United States Embassy in El Salvador proposed to create two TV service announcements, one

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<sup>78</sup> “Remarks to the Press with Q&A by Vice President Joe Biden in Guatemala,” The White House, June 20, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/20/remarks-press-qa-vice-president-joe-biden-guatemala>.

<sup>79</sup> “Central America: El Salvador,” The Central Intelligence Agency: The World Factbook, February 16, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/>; “El Salvador,” Media Landscapes, accessed August 12, 2020, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/el-salvador>.

<sup>80</sup> “Annual Reports,” Latinobarómetro, accessed May 2, 2020, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp?Idioma=0&CMSID=InformesAnuales>.

addressing crime reduction efforts and the other emphasizing the dangers of a trip to enter the United States illegally.<sup>81</sup> In a separate initiative in 2013 and 2014, the United States spent \$457,019 on its “Dangers of the Journey” campaign in El Salvador; additionally the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador partnered with the host nation to create a TV spot titled “Don’t put your lives at risk” warning parents about using *coyotes*, or smugglers, to take their children to the United States.<sup>82</sup>

The high percentage of television and radio communication contrasts with the near 50 percent who rarely or never read the newspaper.<sup>83</sup> According to *Media Landscapes*, however, “print media in El Salvador set the national and international agenda, and that principally television and radio are used as [a] sounding board of the informational content.”<sup>84</sup> Evidence indicates that the United States took this fact into account when communicating via print media. For example, in 2012, after President Funes disagreed with the United States’s decision to designate MS-13 a transnational gang, the U.S. Embassy communicated through the media to mitigate a potential disruption in relations. A headline from Salvadoran newspaper *El Mundo* reads, “Aponte reiterates that ‘MS’ [the gang] is a criminal organization: U.S. ambassador respects opinion of President Funes.”<sup>85</sup> Another example comes from 2014 when the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador was on the front page of *El Mundo* asking financial investors to accept an invitation from the Salvadoran president and open a dialogue of public-private projects.<sup>86</sup> In both examples, Aponte appears to be communicating to the educated elite with an overall desired behavioral effect of building trust in the Salvadoran executive institution.

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<sup>81</sup> Martha E. Estell, “2010 TV co-op proposal: San Salvador,” April 8, 2010, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov). The author of this thesis has been unable to find evidence of whether or not this proposal was approved by the Department of State.

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Central America: Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration.”

<sup>83</sup> Latinobarómetro, “Annual Reports.”

<sup>84</sup> *Media Landscapes*, “El Salvador.”

<sup>85</sup> Enrique Garcia, “Aponte reitera que la ‘MS’ es organizacion criminal transnacional,” [Aponte reiterates that ‘MS’ is a transnational criminal organization] *Edición Digital de Diario El Mundo*, October 17, 2012.

<sup>86</sup> “EE.UU pide mejorar el clima de negocios,” [U.S. asks to improve business climate] *Edición Digital de Diario El Mundo*, June 6, 2014.

Additionally, much of El Salvador is connected via mobile telephone—for every 100 inhabitants, there were 134.5 mobile lines in 2011.<sup>87</sup> However, access to the internet, whether via a mobile phone or on a computer was minimal: from 2007 to 2015, internet usage grew from 6.1 percent of the population to 25 percent.<sup>88</sup> Of those who used the internet in 2015 (which is 1.5 million people), the most popular social media sites were Facebook at 99 percent, YouTube at 86 percent, and Twitter at 59 percent.<sup>89</sup> This may explain why the U.S. Embassy did not use social media until 2010 and even then, it focused solely on Facebook. Two years later, it posted its first video to YouTube and in 2013, the embassy joined Twitter.<sup>90</sup> Early in the embassy’s social media effort, it is challenging to recognize a clear communication strategy. Two of the clear planning efforts in 2013 come from one series on visa information and a series called “About the USA,” which engaged Salvadoran audiences lightheartedly to share what they knew about the United States.<sup>91</sup> The “About the USA” posts did receive more engagement than the organization’s other posts. For example, in a June 3, 2013 post, the embassy asks users, “Have you visited Washington, D.C.? Tell us about your experience. If you have not been, what monument

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<sup>87</sup> “Evolución Del Mercado de Telecomunicaciones En El Salvador,” [Evolution of Telecommunications Market in El Salvador] Superintendencia General de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones, 2011, <https://www.siget.gob.sv>.

<sup>88</sup> “El Salvador,” The World Bank, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/el-salvador>.

<sup>89</sup> “Estudios de Redes Sociales en El Salvador (2015),” Analitika, January 2015, <https://analitika.https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ru8oUqeKHLdJOZUBp4Ls36xP5tOKBB8s/view.sv/media/>.

<sup>90</sup> “USEmbassyElSalvador,” YouTube, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/USEmbassyElSalvador/about>. U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “Embajada EEUU En ES (@USEmbassySV),” Twitter, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/USEmbassySV>.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “#AboutTheUSA Este Día En 1955 Disneylandia Abrió En California de La Mano de Uno de Los Emprendedores Más Conocidos de EE.UU. Walt Disney ¿Qué Piensas de Esta Frase de Él?,” [#AbouttheUSA On this day in 1955 Disneyland’s doors were opened by one of the most well-known entrepreneurs in the U.S., Walt Disney. What do you think of this quotation from him?] accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/embajadaamericanaelsalvador/photos/a.149885505049462/549798021724873>; U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “#AboutTheUSA ¿Has Visitado Washington, D.C.? CuéntanosCuál Fue Tu Experiencia. Si No Has Ido, ¿cuáles Monumentos Te Lllaman Más La Atención?,” [#AboutTheUSA Have you visited Washington, D.C.? Tell us what about your experience and if you have not visited, which monuments are you drawn to?] June 3, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/embajadaamericanaelsalvador/photos/a.149885505049462/533434403361235>.



catches your attention?”<sup>92</sup> The majority of comments were positive, with many expressing their desire to see the United States; and while high engagement rates—i.e., a high comments to audience size ratio—with positive comments is usually a reassuring metric on social media, it does not support, and even contradicts, U.S. policy to deter irregular migration and enhance economic opportunity in El Salvador. By 2014, however, the embassy began to strategically integrate its use of social media PD with its overall embassy goals, specifically to inspire Salvadorans to build strong local communities. Titled *Sueño Salvadoreño* (Salvadoran Dream) this multi-year project piloted “positive messaging and success stories to encourage people to stay,”<sup>93</sup> across all three social media platforms. This campaign utilized dynamic photos and videos and showed Salvadorans telling their own stories.

With the increase in mobile infrastructure, which facilitated more strategic engagement on social media, there was also increased communication between Salvadorans and the 1.3 million foreign-born Salvadorans residing in the United States (as of 2015).<sup>94</sup> Since the Cold War, a steady pattern of migration emerged, beginning first with the civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1991. During this time, the Salvadoran population in the United States quintupled to approximately 465,000 people.<sup>95</sup> Even after the civil war, both legal and illegal migration continued to increase, mostly due to social challenges and natural disasters.<sup>96</sup> Thirty-two percent of the Salvadoran diaspora lives in California, followed by 15 percent in Texas.<sup>97</sup> Of note, the second largest concentration of

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<sup>92</sup> U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “#AboutTheUSA:: ¿Has Visitado Washington, D.C.? CuéntanosCuál Fue Tu Experiencia. Si No Has Ido, ¿cuáles Monumentos Te Lllaman Más La Atención?”

<sup>93</sup> U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, “El Salvador: Scen setter for CODEL Cardin Visit, June 30-July 02, 2015” (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, June 26, 2015), <https://www.foia.state.gov>.

<sup>94</sup> Luis Noe-Bustamante, Antonio Flores, and Sono Shah, “Facts on Latinos of Salvadoran Origin in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project, September 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-salvadoran-origin-latinos/>.

<sup>95</sup> Nadia Y. Flores-Yeffal and Karen A. Pren, “Predicting Unauthorized Salvadoran Migrants’ First Migration to the United States between 1965 and 2007,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, February 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502418765404>.

<sup>96</sup> Flores-Yeffal and Pren.

<sup>97</sup> Noe-Bustamante, Flores, and Shah, “Facts on Latinos of Salvadoran Origin in the U.S.”

Salvadorans in the United States is in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, where there are up to 400,000 Salvadorans (this number accounts for undocumented immigrants).<sup>98</sup>

This large immigrant population communicates and receives news in similar ways to those within El Salvador. José Luis Benitez explains that immigrant Salvadorans will use the internet to read the leading newspapers and listen to Spanish-language radio. More important for this study, however, is that finding that shared stories of migration success promoted more international migration.<sup>99</sup> As stated earlier, transnational families speak to one another via mobile telephone, but new social and communication networks also provided an avenue for more instantaneous connectivity.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States played a role in how key U.S. PD information and messaging reaches Salvadorans in-country. This explains why the United States aired the same TV and radio spots that ran in El Salvador during the “Dangers of the Journey” campaign to large U.S.-based Salvadoran communities.<sup>101</sup>

Yet even with a robust media scene and increasing telecommunications, the other central node of effective communication—the journalists who seek to report on the country’s issues—struggled for press freedom due to rifts with both the federal government and criminal/gang violence.<sup>102</sup> El Salvador’s Article 6 of the 1983 constitution protects the freedom of expression and before the increase in gang violence in the late 2010s, El Salvador seemed to be an example of post-conflict resolution and democratization.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> José Luis Benítez, “Transnational Dimensions of the Digital Divide among Salvadoran Immigrants in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area,” *Global Networks* 6, no. 2 (2006): 181–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00140.x>.

<sup>99</sup> Flores-Yeffal and Pren, “Predicting Unauthorized Salvadoran Migrants’ First Migration to the United States between 1965 and 2007.”

<sup>100</sup> Benítez, “Transnational Dimensions of the Digital Divide among Salvadoran Immigrants in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area.”

<sup>101</sup> “IOM Supports El Salvador Information Campaign Warning Parents of Risks Faced by Unaccompanied Children Traveling to USA,” International Organization for Migration, July 18, 2014, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-supports-el-salvador-information-campaign-warning-parents-risks-faced-unaccompanied>.

<sup>102</sup> “El Salvador,” Freedom House, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2017>.

<sup>103</sup> Lawrence Michael Ladutke, *Freedom of Expression in El Salvador: The Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy* (McFarland, 2015).

Beginning in 2015, however, the country's score on the *Freedom House* World Press Freedom Index began to decrease mainly due to government intimidation and restrictions of media access to information as well as gangs who threatened journalists.<sup>104</sup> For example, *Freedom House* writes that, "El Faro [digital magazine] journalists were subject to death threats, illegal surveillance, and harassment following two July 2015 reports in which they accused police of abusing suspects in custody and unlawfully killing eight people."<sup>105</sup> President Sánchez Cerén also accused journalists of conducting "a 'psychological terror campaign' against his government."<sup>106</sup> Journalists also often received threats from criminal organizations, causing members of the media to self-censor their content;<sup>107</sup> the gangs would often follow-through with those threats. For example, in 2009, members of the "Calle 18" gang murdered documentarian Christian Poveda and in 2014, gangs likely killed television cameraman Carlos José Orellana.<sup>108</sup> Putting this into perspective for U.S. PD efforts in El Salvador, Salvadoran government influence of news content and gang pressures on journalists might affect the ability for U.S. messaging to reach the Salvadoran public. Moreover, criminal influence can counteract U.S. efforts. For example, in 2009, an internet rumor circulated that gangs were imposing a curfew and that businesses caught violating the curfew would be targeted.<sup>109</sup> Though likely a hoax, in an e-mail exchange between embassy staff, one staffer wrote, "I suppose the environment's ripe for this sort of thing, especially given real concerns over violence."<sup>110</sup> Moreover, in the response to the 2014

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<sup>104</sup> "El Salvador: Structural Violence and Government Control," Reporters without Borders, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/el-salvador>.

<sup>105</sup> Arch Puddington et al., *Freedom in the World 2016: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, 2017, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1440175>.

<sup>106</sup> "Freedom of Information Shrinks during President's First Year," Reporters without Borders, June 4, 2015, <https://rsf.org/en/news/freedom-information-shrinks-during-presidents-first-year>.

<sup>107</sup> "El Salvador."

<sup>108</sup> Reporters without Borders, "El Salvador."

<sup>109</sup> Douglas W. Kraft, "Re: Sombra Negra," October 26, 2009, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

<sup>110</sup> Kraft.

border crises, officials specifically noted immigration misinformation propagated by criminal organizations.<sup>111</sup>

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Between 2009 and 2016, U.S. policy in El Salvador focused on combatting crime, increasing economic viability, and reducing irregular migration. During this timeframe, it shifted from a Salvadoran-centric aid package called the Partnership for Growth to a whole-of-region U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. The United States would also change its public diplomacy tactics in the eight-year span to become more actively linked to U.S. policy as demonstrated through official speeches from President Obama, then-Vice President Biden, and U.S. Ambassador Aponte as well as through strategic communication campaigns.

With the victory of an FMLN president in 2009, the United States apparently sought to connect to the Salvadoran public by building the legitimacy of its relationship with El Salvador. It attempted to accomplish this through a high-level visit from President Obama as well as acknowledging historic symbols from the Salvadoran Civil War. Once the relationship was established, the United States pivoted its official speeches to focus on three issues: economic investment, democratic processes, and a commitment to joint security initiatives. Concerning strategic messaging, the U.S. simultaneously adapted to the surge in irregular migration and increased access to telecommunications to inspire Salvadoran national pride and to inform Salvadorans about the risks of traveling without a visa. Overall, U.S. PD efforts from 2009 to 2016 demonstrated that while the U.S. sought to persuade the Salvadoran public that the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship was strong and that it should value democratic processes and institutions, it paradoxically had to contend with trying to deter a vast number of that public from immigrating north.

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<sup>111</sup> The White House, “Remarks to the Press with Q&A by Vice President Joe Biden in Guatemala,” June 20, 2014; International Organization for Migration, “El Salvador: No Pongas En Riesgo Sus Vidas,” [El Salvador: Do not put your lives at risk] YouTube, July 16, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw8kQWLR-\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw8kQWLR-_s).

### **III. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN HONDURAS: 2009 TO 2016**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

When a coup d'état ousted democratically-elected Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya on June 28, 2009, U.S. foreign policy in Honduras drastically changed. In that, a country that was once a relatively low priority now required the attention of U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This event would define U.S. policy and public diplomacy (PD) in Honduras between 2009 and 2016. During those seven years, and especially from 2009 to 2014, the United States focused on Honduran-specific programs to reduce citizen insecurity. These initiatives concentrated on improving rule of law and on enhancing training for law enforcement to combat narco-trafficking. By 2014, the United States had adopted a regionally-centered policy called the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, which, coincidentally, also overlapped with the 2014 immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. It was at this point that the United States began to also focus more on boosting economic prosperity and deterring irregular migration in Honduras.

These policy objectives and PD efforts, however, often appeared to lack clear direction and faced challenges in implementation between 2009 and 2014. Then in 2014, with the adoption of the new strategy, policy and PD tactics became more integrated, though they still appeared to be discordant. This thesis chapter first provides an analysis of U.S. policy during the coup and its aftermath to demonstrate how and why U.S. policy was noncommittal, both because of the U.S. response and because of Honduran challenges to rule of law and human rights. Next, I look at U.S. policy from 2010 until 2016, which attempted to deal with the decrease in democratic norms as well as an increase in narco-trafficking and irregular migration. I then transition to U.S. PD efforts in Honduras. I discuss how the United States attempted to use PD within Honduras to support both Zelaya and democratic processes during the political crisis. Lastly, I address two parts of U.S. PD efforts in the aftermath of the coup. I provide an example of an official speech from then-Vice President Joe Biden and discuss his communication priorities. Additionally, I analyze strategic communication in the media, which includes details of

Honduras's information environment, and specific social media communication from the U.S. Embassy Honduras to prevent irregular migration to the United States. Overall, between 2009 and 2016, the United States had difficulties using PD to persuade Honduran stakeholders and the public in accordance with its policy objectives to increase citizen security (primarily through combatting crime, improving rule of law, and preventing irregular migration) because of both the lack of clear policy as well as challenges to freedom of expression in Honduras.

## **B. THE HONDURAN COUP AND U.S. POLICY: 2009 TO 2016**

Elected in 2005, President Zelaya was a businessman, landowner, and in the early 2000s, a moderate politician. Once in office, he introduced domestic measures to increase the minimum wage and increase free school enrollment. He also resisted pressure from business elites to privatize the state-owned electricity company.<sup>112</sup> In foreign policy, Honduras entered into the U.S.-led Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA–DR) in 2006, which sought to eliminate tariffs and increase foreign direct investment in Honduras.<sup>113</sup> While the free trade agreement did initially alleviate some of the economic pressure in Honduras, the 2008 global recession hit Honduras particularly hard because of its close connection with the U.S. economy. Honduras's economy relied heavily on U.S. tourists, foreign direct investment, its export market, and remittances from immigrants.<sup>114</sup> In 2008, Honduras's GDP slowed by 2.3 percent to an annual rate of 4 percent.<sup>115</sup> To offset the drop, in late 2008, Zelaya announced that Honduras would join Petrocaribe and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (known for

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<sup>112</sup> Jeffery R. Webber and Barry Carr, *The New Latin American Left: Cracks in the Empire* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 56–59, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1034722>.

<sup>113</sup> Peter J. Meyer, "Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations" CRS Report No. RL34027 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 30, 2014), <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=754862>.

<sup>114</sup> Webber and Carr, *The New Latin American Left*, 56–59.

<sup>115</sup> "Honduras: evolución económica durante 2008 y perspectivas para 2009," [Honduras: economic evolution during 2008 and perspectives from 2009] Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), August 2009, <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/25890-honduras-evolucion-economica-durante-2008-perspectivas-2009>.

its Spanish acronym, ALBA), which were both led by Venezuela's anti-American President Hugo Chavez. Zelaya's announcement effectively shifted Honduras's foreign policy to the political left and away from the United States.<sup>116</sup> The decision also proved controversial among Honduran right-wing politicians and business leaders, who began to see Zelaya's policies as ideologically opposite to the rest of the ruling class;<sup>117</sup> consequently, the Honduran Congress rejected both proposals to join ALBA and Petrocaribe.

Inter-branch conflict continued in 2009. In the spring, when Zelaya called for a non-binding referendum asking Hondurans if they would support a rewrite to the country's constitution, "this provoked widespread fears that Zelaya wanted to rescind the country's historic no-reelection rule and perpetuate his hold on power."<sup>118</sup> On June 28, 2009, the morning the referendum was scheduled to take place, the Honduran military entered Zelaya's residence and put him on a plane to Costa Rica. Roberto Michelleti, a member of the same political party as Zelaya, assumed the Honduran presidency and control of the de facto government.

The United States' international response, both immediate and long-term, as well as follow-on policy were neither particularly strong in opposition of the coup nor did it support the military's actions to oust a democratically-elected head of state. Within the first day after the overthrow, Obama released a statement saying, "I am deeply concerned by reports coming out of Honduras...I call on all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms, the rule of law and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Any existing disputes must be resolved peacefully through dialogue free from any outside interference."<sup>119</sup> While Obama's statement was timely and did support democratic

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<sup>116</sup> Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson and Joseph Daniel Ura, "Public Opinion and Conflict in the Separation of Powers: Understanding the Honduran Coup of 2009," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 105–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951629812453216>.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor-Robinson and Ura.

<sup>118</sup> Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 266.

<sup>119</sup> "Statement from the President on the Situation in Honduras," The White House, June 28, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-situation-honduras>.

processes, it neglected to fully condemn the coup at the international level. (This thesis chapter later discusses U.S. public diplomacy efforts *within* Honduras in response to the coup).

From a policy perspective, between July and October 2009, the United States terminated a large majority of economic and security assistance to Honduras. It suspended military assistance programs valued at \$16.5 million in July 2009; however, it did continue to provide aid that went directly to the Honduran people, such as food and disaster assistance.<sup>120</sup> The U.S. Embassy in Honduras prohibited its staff from interacting with Micheletti or his supporters. By September 2009, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) terminated \$9.4 million in aid and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) cut an additional \$11 million.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens maintained close contact with Zelaya's family (he even housed Zelaya's youngest son and his family in the ambassador's residence for a short period<sup>122</sup>). The U.S. then canceled the visas of prominent supporters of the de facto government in September 2009.<sup>123</sup>

With U.S. and European Union support, the Organization of American States began to lead negotiations between Zelaya and Micheletti's regime in August 2009; however, the meetings ended in an impasse. The United States then took the lead on negotiations in October 2009, brokering a deal known as the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accord. The accord would create a unity government as well as reinstate Zelaya for the remaining four months of his term (the next presidential elections, scheduled pre-coup, were to take place on November 29, 2009), but still required Honduran congressional approval.<sup>124</sup> However,

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<sup>120</sup> "U.S. Assistance to Honduras (Taken Question)," U.S. Department of State, July 7, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125762.htm>.

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Department of State; JoAnne Allen, "U.S. Cuts off \$11 Million in Aid to Honduras," Reuters, September 9, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN09355670>.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras, "Honduran Coup: Sitrep 3," June 28, 2009.

<sup>123</sup> "Honduran Leader Says U.S. Voids Visa Because of Coup," Reuters, September 12, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-honduras-usa-idUSTRE58B1BD20090912>.

<sup>124</sup> J. Mark Ruhl, "Honduras Unravels," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 2 (April 2010): 93–107, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1353/jod.0.0170>.



Honduran lawmakers did not approve the agreement before the elections, putting the United States' policy to legitimize Zelaya as the leader of Honduras in a precarious position. In early November, U.S. Senator Jim DeMint said the United States would recognize election results regardless of accord implementation while, contrastingly, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) said, "Our policy goal has always been to help the Hondurans restore the democratic order in the country...our commitment is to the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accord and its implementation...Failure to implement the accord could jeopardize recognition of the election by the international community."<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, however, as the elections drew closer without reinstatement of Zelaya, the DOS changed direction, and on November 27, 2009, it announced it would support election results despite lack of accord implementation.<sup>126</sup>

Two days later, Honduras elected conservative candidate Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo and on December 2, 2009, the Honduran Congress voted 111–14 to not reinstate Zelaya. Though this was not the desired outcome of the United States, the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accord mandated Honduran congressional approval and thus, with the little amount of time left before Lobo's inauguration, the United States reprioritized democratic processes over specific support to Zelaya. In a press teleconference on December 3, newly-appointed Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela said, "Important work remains to reestablish a democratic and constitutional order in Honduras and promote national reconciliation in the wake of the June 28 coup d'état, as the status quo remains unacceptable."<sup>127</sup> Thus, from June until December 2009, the United States provided disparate policy responses in an attempt to quell the democratic crisis in Honduras. While it did suspend some aid, it did not recall its ambassador, nor did it completely cut off all relations with the Micheletti administration. Eventually, despite

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<sup>125</sup> "Honduras and the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accord (Taken Question)," U.S. Department of State, November 6, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/nov/131609.htm>.; "Zelaya: US-Brokered Honduras Deal 'Dead,'" Christian Science Monitor, November 6, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2009/1106/p06s10-woam.html>.

<sup>126</sup> "The Restoration of Democratic and Constitutional Order in Honduras," U.S. Department of State, November 27, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/nov/132501.htm>.

<sup>127</sup> "Remarks on Recent Developments in Honduras," U.S. Department of State, December 3, 2009, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/p/wha/rls/rm/2009/133101.htm>.

funding cuts, the de facto regime maintained control and the lack of clear action gave the perception of tacit U.S. approval.

The 2009 coup d'état and ensuing U.S. response provided the foundation for U.S. policy for the next three years until 2014: reducing citizen insecurity through enhanced training for law enforcement as well as emphasizing rule of law and respect for human rights.<sup>128</sup> By 2014, U.S. policy would then shift to be more regionally centered through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America that focused on increasing economic prosperity and deterring irregular migration.

Concerning citizen insecurity, the United States rebranded the Mérida Initiative, a joint Mexico-Central American-United States security plan, into the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) in 2010. This security package separated Central America from Mexico and provided equipment, training, and technical assistance in law enforcement operations and “was also designed to strengthen the long-term capacities of Central American governments to address security challenges and the underlying conditions that contribute to them.”<sup>129</sup> It emphasized counter narcotics operations (the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement foreign aid account accounted for 66 percent of appropriations), but also supported government transparency and accountability. Additionally, Honduras played a key role in the U.S. ability to fight narco-traffickers because of the U.S.-run Soto Cano Air Base, where more than 500 U.S. military personnel were stationed to conduct missions to counter transnational crime and to provide humanitarian assistance.<sup>130</sup>

Between fiscal year 2008 and 2012, Honduras received approximately 17.3 percent of the funds allocated to the overall program, around \$100 million per year.<sup>131</sup> Beginning

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<sup>128</sup> In the aftermath of the coup, violent crime, narco-trafficking and economic strife were all increasing.

<sup>129</sup> Meyer and Seelke, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress.”

<sup>130</sup> “Joint Task Force-Bravo Units,” Joint Task Force Bravo, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil/Units/>.

<sup>131</sup> Meyer and Seelke, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress.”

in 2012, CARSI funding included a Honduras-specific provision that reduced aid due to reports of human rights violations. The key human rights concern stemmed from allegations of abuse from the chief of Honduras's National Police, Juan Carlos Bonilla. According to Human Rights Watch, the U.S. Congress withheld approximately \$10 million of funding pending an investigation into Bonilla.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, reports emerged that since Lobo took office, state security forces were responsible for the deaths of 300 people, including 34 members of the opposition.<sup>133</sup> In 2013, Honduras adopted a new human rights policy to address the country's challenges; however, according to Peter J. Meyer, human rights organizations saw Honduran efforts as insufficient for "failing to properly investigate human rights violations and bring those responsible to justice."<sup>134</sup>

Because of these failures in human rights, the U.S. Congress pressured the DOS to reduce security assistance even further in 2014. U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky led a contingent of more than 100 other representatives asking Secretary of State John Kerry to "to use [his] leverage to urge the Honduran government to protect the fundamental human rights of its citizens, end the use of military forces for law enforcement, investigate and prosecute abuses, and more broadly, restore the rule of law." Despite this external pressure from U.S. lawmakers to the DOS, the United States increased its aid, mainly in counter narcotics and food assistance, to Honduras in 2015 from \$96 million to almost \$134 million.<sup>135</sup>

This increase in aid coincides with the introduction of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, which sought to address regional economic challenges. Its stated objective was to create "an economically integrated Central America that is fully democratic; provides economic opportunities to its people; enjoys more accountable, transparent, and effective public institutions; and ensures a safe environment for its

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<sup>132</sup> "World Report 2014: Honduras," Human Rights Watch, December 18, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/honduras>.

<sup>133</sup> Héctor Perla, Salvador Martí i Puig, and Danny Burrige, *Central America's Relations with the United States of America, Handbook of Central American Governance*, (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073148-18>, 317.

<sup>134</sup> Peter J. Meyer, "Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010" (Congressional Research Service, February 1, 2010), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41064.pdf>.

<sup>135</sup> "U.S. Foreign Aid by Country - Honduras," U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Aid Explorer, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd>.

citizens.”<sup>136</sup> The strategy also looked to bridge the divisions amongst federal agencies as well as private donors.<sup>137</sup> Lastly, it also laid out a plan for the other Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador and Guatemala—to create a Central American-led common vision, called the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P), which it successfully accomplished in November 2014.<sup>138</sup> Though the strategy did not specifically address irregular migration, it did address some of the factors that lead to Hondurans leaving their homes, such as promoting work force development and increasing resilience to climate change.

### C. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THE 2009 COUP

As stated earlier, the first publicized response from the Obama administration at the international level did not fully condemn the June 28, 2009 coup in Honduras; the U.S. Embassy in Honduras, however, initially tried to take a stronger stance to urge the reinstatement of Zelaya, but arguably failed because of the diminished media freedom within Honduras and lack of clear vision from the DOS. In an e-mail from Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon to his DOS leadership, he wrote, “This seizure and expulsion of the President was an intolerable act by the armed forces and we are going to have to say this loud and clear.”<sup>139</sup> A minority (nearly 41 percent) of the Honduran public favored the ousting of Zelaya and thus, a local public diplomacy push from the embassy could have possibly shaped Honduran public opinion toward the reinstatement of the elected leader.<sup>140</sup> In the ambassador’s first press conference on June 28 at the U.S. Embassy, Llorens used firmer rhetoric than the White House. He said, “There has been an enormous breach. The only president that the United States recognizes is President

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<sup>136</sup> The White House, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.”

<sup>137</sup> Meyer, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress.”

<sup>138</sup> The White House, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.”

<sup>139</sup> Thomas A. Shannon, “Fw: Honduran President Zelaya Reportedly Seized by Armed Forces,” June 28, 2009, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov). This e-mail as well as all other e-mails referenced in this thesis were released through the U.S. State Department Freedom of Information Act Virtual Reading room located at <https://www.foia.gov>

<sup>140</sup> “In Honduras, Instability, Fear of Civil War Preceded Deal,” Gallup Inc., October 30, 2009, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/123992/Honduras-Instability-Fear-Civil-War-Preceded-Deal.aspx>.

Zelaya.”<sup>141</sup> He continued with “insisting” that the government permit the return of press freedom, which the armed forces had immediately limited after ousting Zelaya.<sup>142</sup> Honduras would experience a decrease in freedom of expression from 2009 to 2016. In 2013, for example, out of 180 countries, Honduras was ranked 127th in the World Press Freedom Index.

Because of this lack of press freedom, Llorens faced difficulty in communicating the U.S. response to the Honduran public. After the press conference, Llorens conducted a broadcasted telephone interview with Honduran Minister of the Presidency Enrique Flores Lanza. The Honduran government abruptly cut off the broadcast halfway through the interview, however, as Lanza was “explaining that the resignation letter President Zelaya had purportedly submitted was a forgery.”<sup>143</sup> The limits on the freedom of expression would continue through the summer and fall of 2009. An Inter-American Commission on Human Rights confirmed in August “the existence of serious restrictions to the exercise of freedom of expression coming from the de facto government...which has generated an atmosphere of intimidation that inhibits the free exercise [of] expression.”<sup>144</sup> The commission also found that journalists and editors had received death threats and were attacked because of their opinion on the coup. Furthermore, according at least one independent scholar, those media outlets that did maintain independent operations were usually biased to the coup’s desired success.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Apolinar Rea, *Embajador de EEUU En Honduras Reconoce Solo a Manuel Zelaya* [U.S. Ambassador in Honduras only recognizes Manuel Zelaya], June 28, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nePnd-CyfXc>.

<sup>142</sup> Indeed, Honduras would experience a decrease in freedom of expression from 2009 to 2016. In 2013, for example, out of 180 countries, Honduras was ranked 127th in the World Press Freedom Index. ; “Honduras: Ever-Changing Threats,” Reporters without Borders, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/honduras>.

<sup>143</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras, “Honduran Coup: Sitrep 3,” June 28, 2009.

<sup>144</sup> “Preliminary Observations on the IACHR Visit to Honduras,” Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, August 21, 2009, <http://www.cidh.org/Comunicados/English/2009/60-09eng.Preliminary.Observations.htm>.

<sup>145</sup> Barry Cannon and Mo Hume, “Central America, Civil Society and the ‘Pink Tide’: Democratization or de-Democratization?,” *Democratization* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 1039–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.619775>.

Obstacles to using PD to shape key audiences through the media were compounded by the lack of strong statements from the DOS in Washington, D.C.,. By the middle of August, neither the secretary of state nor the assistant secretary to the Western Hemisphere had made a comment on Honduras since the suspension of aid announcement in July. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the then-DOS Policy and Planning director, wrote to Clinton's chief of staff on policy, Jacob Sullivan, about her apprehensions of a "drifting" U.S. policy.<sup>146</sup> She wrote to him saying, "I have been concerned all last week that we are really losing the initiative on Honduras...I think this is a real opportunity for [the secretary] to get her first real diplomatic win on resolving a crisis."<sup>147</sup> The DOS, however, made no further public statements until the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accord discussions in October 2009. At that point, Llorens shifted much of his public rhetoric in support of Zelaya to one focused on strengthening democracy.<sup>148</sup>

#### **D. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN HONDURAS**

##### **1. U.S. Public Diplomacy: Official Speeches**

For nearly the next two years after the coup until the fall of 2011, the Obama administration did not prioritize Honduras in the public sphere. This may have been to maintain distance from the country's new President Lobo; it also may have to avoid giving the perception that it endorsed its unconstitutional activity and its alleged human rights abuses in the wake of the coup. Lobo did visit Washington, D.C., in October 2011, during which Obama emphasized the importance of constitutional order as well as free and fair elections.<sup>149</sup> Additionally, he renewed his commitment on cooperating in security initiatives. Then-Vice Biden reciprocated this visit in March 2012. In a joint press conference in Tegucigalpa, Biden focused on security and economic development (and

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<sup>146</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Re: Time-Sensitive: Honduras," U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, August 16, 2009, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

<sup>147</sup> Slaughter.

<sup>148</sup> "EE.UU. pide restablecer garantías," [U.S. asks to reestablish guarantees] *El Diario La Prensa*, September 30, 2009, sec. Nuestros Países.

<sup>149</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and President Lobo of Honduras Before Bilateral Meeting," The White House, October 5, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/05/remarks-president-obama-and-president-lobo-honduras-bilateral-meeting>.

only mentioned “rule of law” once).<sup>150</sup> He spoke of a shared responsibility in security and that, “We understand the grave threats of narcotrafficking and gang violence, and the threat it poses to the people of Honduras.” Concerning economic prosperity, he addressed the significance of the CAFTA-DR and his country’s interest in developing a more prosperous Honduras. Later, in an interview with *Diario La Prensa* newspaper, only then did he express the administration’s concerns about irregular migration.<sup>151</sup> Given that Biden did not mention migration in his initial remarks, it appears it was not yet a U.S. policy priority in Honduras, yet his visit did signal that the United States was looking to strengthen the post-coup U.S.-Honduran relationship.

Of note, during Biden’s visit to Honduras he did not meet with any local Honduran civic groups or members of the public, which is a typical public diplomacy tool for key officials.<sup>152</sup> This is especially intriguing because during his trip to Mexico the day prior, Biden visited the Basilica of Our Lady Guadalupe in the middle of Mexico City.<sup>153</sup>

## **2. U.S. Public Diplomacy: Strategic Communication**

Though no high-level official from the U.S. executive branch would return to Honduras for an official visit, the White House would still communicate via the media to the Honduran public post-2012; however, it would center more on deterring on irregular migration. For example, Biden met with the three Northern Triangle presidents jointly many times between 2014 and 2016, and during his first press conference in the wake of the border crisis, Biden spoke of again of a “shared responsibility” between all involved nations to address irregular migration. He also discussed how governments “agreed to

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<sup>150</sup> “Joint Statement to the Press by Vice President Joe Biden and Honduran President Porfirio Lobo Sosa,” The White House, March 6, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/joint-statement-press-vice-president-joe-biden-and-honduran-president-po>.

<sup>151</sup> “Biden: ‘Podemos Crear Una Honduras Más Segura y Próspera,’” [Biden: “We can create a more secure and prosperous Honduras”] *Diario La Prensa*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/apertura/329123-98/biden-podemos-crear-una-honduras-más-segura-y-próspera>.

<sup>152</sup> For example, when Obama visited El Salvador in 2011, he also visited the tomb of Father Oscar Romero.

<sup>153</sup> While more evidence would need to be gathered to determine why Biden did not visit community members, it could possibly be because of the tenuous relationship between the United States and the Lobo administration, that the U.S. did not prioritize communicating with the Honduras public, or simply that Biden did not have the time in his itinerary.

work to counter and correct the misinformation smugglers are propagating about U.S. immigration policy, and discourage families from sending their children on this perilous journey.”<sup>154</sup> The U.S. Embassy in Honduras adopted similar rhetoric on irregular migration, but also primarily used the local media to reiterate the importance of rule of law and human rights. Its social media campaign that attempted to deter irregular migration by seeking to persuade Honduran parents that their children needed them through a campaign was titled “*Nuestros Niños Necesitan*” (Our Children Need). Furthermore, because of reduced journalistic freedom and lack of telecommunications infrastructure, it is unlikely that the United States reached the majority of the Honduran public through its PD efforts in the media and online. The following section looks at U.S. PD efforts in strategic communication and social media by discussing the three nodes of communication: the sender (i.e., the United States), the receiver (i.e., Hondurans) and the messenger (i.e., communications technology and the media).

Honduras’s population of 10 million is divided almost evenly between rural and urban areas (approximately 2 million of its citizens live in the two main cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula) and they mainly receive their information via radio. According to the 2013 Latinobarometer survey, 60 percent of Hondurans listen to at least one hour of radio a day.<sup>155</sup> This would explain why, in September 2009, then-Ambassador Llorens conducted a radio interview urging the de facto government to reinstate constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression to the Honduran public.<sup>156</sup> This message would have been of particular importance in attempting to shape the public’s perceptions given that, in 2013, nearly 66 percent of Hondurans believed, “The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that might be politically destabilizing.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, Llorens would have had an interest in also convincing the public, using radio communication, that freedom of expression was important in a democracy.

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<sup>154</sup> The White House, “Remarks to the Press with Q&A by Vice President Joe Biden in Guatemala,” June 20, 2014.

<sup>155</sup> “Análisis de Datos,” Latinobarómetro, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>.

<sup>156</sup> El Diario La Prensa, “EE.UU. pide restablecer garantías.”

<sup>157</sup> Latinobarómetro, “Análisis de Datos.”



The high number of radio listeners is contrasted with the lower percentage of television watchers (36.2 percent watch one to two hours of television a day on weekdays), newspaper readers (65 percent never read a newspaper) and even lower amount who use the internet (77.8 percent had never connected to the internet in 2013).<sup>158</sup> During this time period, television, and digital media increased their capacity to reach more Hondurans because of technological developments whereas print media suffered. According to *Media Landscapes*, “The loss of influence and trust from the public, the sharp slowdown in sales volume and the constant political crises of Honduran democracy have caused a ‘forced migration’ towards technology.”<sup>159</sup> Despite these challenges in telecommunications and press freedom, between 2011 and 2016, the U.S. Embassy in Honduras communicated using digital and social media to highlight democratic processes and respect of human rights. Print media would often use embassy tweets to write their reports on U.S. policy news. For example, in 2014, an *El Heraldo* story used U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske’s tweet to report that, “the U.S. diplomatic representative says her country’s support to ‘combat organized crime in Honduras depends on clean and brave leadership.’”<sup>160</sup> Thus, the U.S. Embassy likely used this mode of communication because it was aware that key decisionmakers and business elites would read the content. Kubiske’s tweet is also an example of how the embassy utilized social media in a more integrated manner to complement its security and rule of law policy objectives after the introduction of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement.

This was not always the same in other post-2014 social media efforts. After the U.S.-Mexico border crisis in summer 2014, the embassy launched a public information campaign to persuade Hondurans not to immigrate north.<sup>161</sup> Their campaign, titled “*Nuestros Niños Necesitan*” (Our Children Need), was a series of short videos and

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<sup>158</sup> Latinobarómetro.

<sup>159</sup> “Honduras,” *Media Landscapes*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/honduras/media/radio>.

<sup>160</sup> “Honduras ‘Requiere Un Congreso Transparente,’” [Honduras ‘Requires a Transparent Congress] *Diario El Heraldo*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Pais/story.csp?cid=702292&sid=299&fid=214>.

<sup>161</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Central America: Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration.”

infographics on Facebook that included positive messages about what children need to lead happy and healthy lives. For example, one infographic said, “Our children need security”<sup>162</sup> while another read, “Our children need education.”<sup>163</sup> These messages were meant for parents who might have been thinking of sending their children unaccompanied to the U.S. border, yet there is one major issue with this campaign strategy: only 30 percent of the population had access to the internet and of those users, only 25 percent used Facebook.<sup>164</sup> In the country where the primary reasons for migrating are economic opportunity and violence, it is unlikely most of the intended target audience actually saw these messages.<sup>165</sup>

## E. CONCLUSION

This analysis of U.S. foreign policy and its complementary PD initiatives in Honduras between 2009 and 2016 is an example of how both discordant U.S. priorities and the in-country domestic situation negatively affected the U.S. ability to meet its objectives. During these seven years, the U.S. faced challenges within Honduras to include democratic instability, an uptick in narcotrafficking, decrease in economic prosperity, and an increase in irregular migration. The June 28, 2009 coup d'état was the key incident that affected most U.S. PD efforts during this period, from official speeches to strategic communication campaigns. Even though the United States did seek to prioritize security and economic programs, the challenges in rule of law and respect for human rights prevented the U.S. from fully engaging in those initiatives.

This analysis shows that the United States had many policy priorities in Honduras, yet often these policies lacked clear direction and conviction. Because the Obama

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<sup>162</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras, “Nuestros Niños Necesitan Seguridad,” [Our children need security] Facebook, September 26, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/usembassyhn/photos/a.156086557460/10152276685402461>.

<sup>163</sup> U.S. Embassy in Honduras, “Nuestros Niños Necesitan Educación,” [Our children need education] Facebook, September 2, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/usembassyhn/photos/a.156086557460/10152233496567461>.

<sup>164</sup> Latinobarómetro, “Análisis de Datos.”

<sup>165</sup> “Immigration From Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador Up,” *Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project* (blog), December 7, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/12/07/rise-in-u-s-immigrants-from-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-outpaces-growth-from-elsewhere/>.

administration lost the initiative in its international response to the coup and also because the Honduran de facto government limited press freedom, the U.S. Embassy in Honduras faced difficulties using PD in the aftermath of the political crisis. The follow-on challenges to democratic rule of law meant that the United States distanced itself from the new Honduran administration in 2010 until 2012. Then, with the visit from Biden and his speech on security and economics, this signaled that the U.S. was looking to move past the coup and build legitimacy for the Honduran government. By 2014, the White House faced the immigration crisis and the embassy used social media to try to deter migration while it also continued to push messaging on rule of law. Lastly, the continued decrease in Honduran press freedom as well as weak telecommunications infrastructure compounded the U.S. ability to use PD to persuade or the Honduran public.

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## IV. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN GUATEMALA: 2009 TO 2016

### A. INTRODUCTION

In a September 2016 speech at the 20th Annual CAF (Development Bank of Latin America) Conference in Washington, D.C., then-Vice President Joe Biden shared a story about attending the January 2016 inauguration of Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales. He said, “I’ve been to a lot of inaugurations, but President Morales did something amazing. He asked, when he was sworn in, the audience and all citizens watching at home to stand and place their right hands over their hearts, and join him in taking an oath. An oath to fight corruption and put Guatemala first...And it was a powerful sign that the region was beginning to change.”<sup>166</sup> This part of Biden’s speech that highlighted fighting corruption was emblematic of both U.S. foreign policy priorities in Guatemala and its complementary public diplomacy (PD) efforts between 2009 and 2016. During this time, it would be an overarching theme as the United States worked with Guatemala, a country that Transparency International perennially labeled “corrupt” or “very corrupt.”<sup>167</sup> Despite this challenge of corruption, the United States policy and its PD emphasized boosting economic prosperity, increasing citizen security, supporting rule of law through the United Nations-led Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (known by its Spanish acronym, CICIG), and reducing irregular migration. The prioritization of these policies fluctuated during this period depending on external factors, with reducing irregular migration and support for rule of law increasingly demanding more attention by 2016.

This chapter analyzes U.S. PD efforts in Guatemala between 2009 and 2016. First, I discuss U.S. foreign policy objectives and then look at U.S. PD efforts via official speeches from the vice president and the U.S. secretary of state. Next, I examine U.S. strategic communication campaigns, focusing on U.S. messaging and how Guatemalans

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<sup>166</sup> “Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the 20th Annual CAF Conference,” The White House, September 7, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/08/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-20th-annual-caf-conference>.

<sup>167</sup> “Country Corruption Index,” Transparency International, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2016>.

receive those messages through the media (both conventional and social). In its strategic communication, the United States focused on sharing democratic judicial principles and the dangers of migrating while either glossing over or rebranding its security cooperation as economic prosperity initiatives. Overall, I conclude that, because of high-level Guatemalan government corruption, the United States attempted to use PD to influence Guatemalans to trust in rule of law as well as refrain from migrating from their country.

## **B. U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN GUATEMALA: 2009 TO 2016**

Between 2009 and 2016, the United States focused its Guatemalan foreign policy mainly on economic prosperity, citizen security, rule of law, and irregular migration. Concerning economic prosperity, the United States divided its efforts into two parts: boosting trade between the two countries through the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) and reducing food insecurity in the rural regions of the country. Regarding trade, President George W. Bush originally signed the CAFTA-DR in 2005 to open markets for U.S. products in the region and to strengthen ties with democracies in the hemisphere.<sup>168</sup> From 2005 to 2016, U.S. exports to Guatemala increased by 107 percent to \$5.84 billion and Guatemalan exports to the United States increased 31 percent to \$3.9 billion, putting Guatemala in a trade deficit.<sup>169</sup> In 2010, the agreement hit a roadblock when the United States accused Guatemala of failing to enforce its labor laws. Mary Finley Brook writes, “Illegal dismissals, health and safety violations, and violence against union members and labour organizers remain [ed] widespread, particularly in Guatemala...U.S. pressure for reform was slow and limited.” In fact, the United States requested an arbitrations panel to settle the dispute, which continued through 2016.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> “President Signs CAFTA-DR.”

<sup>169</sup> Maureen Taft-Morales, “Guatemala: Political, Security, and Socio- Economic Conditions and U.S. Relations,” CRS Report No. R42580 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service Report, August 7, 2014), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/540dacc24.pdf>.

<sup>170</sup> The United States ultimately lost in the dispute after it failed to provide enough evidence that Guatemala’s loose labor laws were affecting trade negatively. Sandler, Travis & Rosenberg, P.A., “First FTA Labor Case Results in U.S. Loss, Report Says,” Sandler, Travis & Rosenberg, P.A., accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.strtrade.com/trade-news-resources/str-trade-report/trade-report/first-fta-labor-case-results-in-u-s-loss-report-says>.

Yet while the CAFTA-DR appeared to disfavor Guatemala, the United States did concurrently attempt to focus on Guatemalan food insecurity in its economic prosperity initiatives. In 2010, 43.4 percent of Guatemala’s population suffered from chronic malnutrition, the highest national level in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>171</sup> Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala created initiatives to assist communities in need, especially in the rural areas where half of Guatemala’s population lives.<sup>172</sup> For example, in Quiche, USAID sponsored a food cooperative, which, in 2010, sought to help “small scale agricultural producers to increase their incomes and improve quality of life...through the production and exportation of high-value vegetables, such as French green beans and snow peas, to international markets.”<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, in 2012, with assistance from U.S. officials, the Guatemalan government introduced a nutrition initiative for children in their first 1,000 days of life, which included “specific nutrition interventions such as the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and increased access to complementary, fortified food, and to health and nutrition services and counseling.”<sup>174</sup>

To address citizen security in Guatemala, the United States supported programs to combat narcotrafficking, mainly through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). CARSI was introduced in 2010 and was a security package that separated Central America from Mexico to address specific security challenges in that area. The initiative’s stated goals were:

- create safe streets for citizens in the region;
- disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America;

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<sup>171</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “A/S Valenzuela Focuses on Rule of Law, Regional Issues in May 2–3 Visit to Guatemala” (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, May 14, 2010), [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov). This memorandum as well as all cited e-mails in this thesis chapter were released via the U.S. Department of State’s Freedom of Information Act Virtual Reading Room.

<sup>172</sup> “Guatemala: Nutrition Profile” (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2014), [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/USAID-Guatemala\\_NCP.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/USAID-Guatemala_NCP.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “A/S Valenzuela Focuses on Rule of Law, Regional Issues in May 2–3 Visit to Guatemala.”

<sup>174</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, “Guatemala: Nutrition Profile”; Samuel Berger, “Fw: CGI Announcement on Scaling Up Nutrition in Guatemala,” September 11, 2012, [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

- support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;
- re-establish effective state presence and security in communities at risk;
- foster enhanced levels of security coordination and cooperation among nations in the region.<sup>175</sup>

Across all the countries in Central America, CARSI emphasized counter narcotics operations (the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement foreign aid account accounted for 66 percent of appropriations). Specific to Guatemala, between 2008 and 2012, it received 22.5 percent of CARSI funding—the most of any country.<sup>176</sup> It also limited funding to the Guatemalan military because of its legacy of human rights abuses during the civil war from 1960 to 1996.<sup>177</sup>

The United States additionally addressed rule of law concerns in Guatemala through the UN-led CICIG. The United States provided most of the funding for CICIG and saw the commission as an integral part of achieving U.S. objectives. In a U.S. Embassy in Guatemala memorandum to the Department of State (DOS) in March 2009, U.S. Ambassador Stephen McFarland requested continued funding for CICIG and wrote that “security issues are at the top of our substantive agenda with the [Government of Guatemala]. Guatemala’s rule of law institutions are foundering under a wave of violence, much of which is narco-driven. CICIG is the international community’s premier tool in shoring up Guatemala’s [rule of law] institutions and combatting impunity.”<sup>178</sup> Guatemala faced not only one of the highest murder rates in the world at the time of CICIG’s creation in 2006 (43.928 homicides per 100,000 citizens), but also one of the highest rates of

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<sup>175</sup> “Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, September 2013), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-13-771.pdf>.

<sup>176</sup> Meyer and Seelke, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress.”

<sup>177</sup> Meyer and Seelke.

<sup>178</sup> Stephen McFarland, “Recommendation That USG Support CICIG Mandate Extension” (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, March 17, 2009), [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov). This memorandum as well as all e-mails referenced in this thesis are part of a publicly available database released through the U.S. State Department.



impunity for those who committed the homicides (94 percent in 2006).<sup>179</sup> The commission thus aimed to “investigate illegal security groups and clandestine security organizations in Guatemala—criminal groups believed to have infiltrated state institutions fostering impunity and undermining democratic gains in Guatemala.”<sup>180</sup> The commission did not override Guatemalan law, but, rather, sought to assist in strengthening the domestic institutions charged with investigating crimes and establishing justice. Laura Zamudio González writes, “[CICIG] was conceived as an instrument of hybrid international intervention, combining national and international resources to investigate and prosecute—together with the state—the criminal structures that have infiltrated in and that affect the process of peace building in the postconflict context.”<sup>181</sup>

The United States supported CICIG at the beginning of the commission’s mandate, as it initially targeted improving investigations in violent crimes and then in 2013, as the organization transitioned to prioritizing combatting corruption. For instance, ahead of a visit to Guatemala from then-Vice President Joe Biden in February 2015, the embassy wrote in its read-ahead document that CICIG was “a U.S. rule of law priority in Guatemala.”<sup>182</sup> Overall, CICIG and Guatemala’s attorney general achieved some successes and failures. Guatemala reformed its Law Against Organized Crime, which established more effective plea bargaining and established a witness protection program, and it also helped reduce the impunity rate for homicides from 94 to 72 percent by 2012.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> “Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People) - Guatemala,” The World Bank, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?end=2006&locations=GT&start=1995>; “Saving Guatemala’s Fight Against Crime and Impunity,” International Crisis Group, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/guatemala/70-saving-guatemalas-fight-against-crime-and-impunity>.

<sup>180</sup> “CICIG: International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala,” Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/cicig>.

<sup>181</sup> Laura Zamudio González, “The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG): A Self-Directed Organization,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 25, no. 3 (September 25, 2019): 418–44, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02503007>.

<sup>182</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Scenesetter for Vice President Biden’s Visit to Guatemala March 2–4, 2015” (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, February 26, 2015), [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

<sup>183</sup> Héctor Silva Ávalos and Parker Asmann, “5 Takeaways from CICIG, Guatemala’s Anti-Corruption Experiment,” InSight Crime, September 5, 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/5-takeaways-cicig-guatemala-anti-corruption-experiment/>.

Most critically, the CICIG uncovered government corruption at the highest levels. According to Günther Maihold, some of the most prominent cases included, “Rodrigo Rosenberg, a lawyer who staged his own murder to accuse the president of murder, and Alfonso Portillo, a former Guatemalan president accused of corruption and ties with organized crime.”<sup>184</sup> Additionally, in 2015, as public support for the CICIG grew but decreased amongst government officials, CICIG exposed a vast criminal ring that controlled the country’s tax administration.<sup>185</sup> The case, known as La Linea (The Line), ultimately led to the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti.<sup>186</sup>

Beyond its advocacy for rule of law, the United States shifted its other policy priority in 2014 to reducing irregular migration through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (this strategy also coincided with, but was not a result of, the surge of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border). As the name of the initiative suggests, the policy shift also took a whole-of-region approach. The Obama administration introduced the strategy in 2014 and “prioritized prosperity, governance, and security as interconnected and interdependent objectives,”<sup>187</sup> wherein the U.S. government pursued increased coordination across public and private organizations, such as the DOS, the Department of Defense, and non-governmental organizations, who work within the Central American countries.<sup>188</sup> Specific to Guatemala, USAID launched a \$40 million program in “the most violent communities to reduce the risk factors for youth involvement in gangs

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<sup>184</sup> Günther Maihold, “Intervention by Invitation? Shared Sovereignty in the Fight against Impunity in Guatemala,” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 101 (April 14, 2016): 15, <https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.9977>.

<sup>185</sup> González, “The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).”

<sup>186</sup> Of note, CICIG mandate ended in 2019 after President Jimmy Morales did not renew it. Every two years the Guatemalan president needed to reapprove the commission, and thus, CICIG’s investigations into the executive branch did not garner support from the government. The apparent success of CICIG to uncover corruption likely led to its downfall in Guatemala. Sofia Menchu, “Guatemala Not Renewing Mandate of U.N. Anti-Corruption Body,” *Reuters*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guatemala-corruption-idUSKCN1LG2KC>.

<sup>187</sup> U.S. Department of State, “WHA Economic Update and Kudos Cable #10 (November 2014)” (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, December 2, 2014), [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

<sup>188</sup> “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.”

and address [ed] factors driving migration to the United States.”<sup>189</sup> The strategy also targeted a goal for Northern Triangle governments to create their own plan, with U.S. support, to address the economic and security challenges for their citizens, which was called the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P).<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, separate from this strategy but important to U.S. migration policy in Guatemala, Guatemalan immigrants were not protected under Temporary Protected Status (TPS) unlike the other countries in the Northern Triangle. According to the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala in 2015, “there [was] a palpable sense among many Guatemalans that they are due some sort of immigration relief.”<sup>191</sup>

### C. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: OFFICIAL SPEECHES

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Guatemala twice, 2010 and 2011, and then-Vice President Biden visited Guatemala three times, once a year between 2014 and 2016. The following section analyzes those visits and their public diplomacy efforts, which will demonstrate how PD messaging in speeches transitioned from focusing on security—specifically combatting narcotrafficking—to an emphasis on rule of law and reducing irregular migration.

In March 2010, during her shared remarks with Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom, Clinton spoke of their “shared interests in advancing security, social inclusion, and broad-based economic progress...and of the need to protect the rights of workers and to promote truly sustainable and effective economic growth.”<sup>192</sup> Approximately a third of her short, prepared remarks centered on the democratic crisis in Honduras, which had experienced a military coup d’état in June 2009. Yet it was not her prepared remarks, but

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<sup>189</sup> “Fact Sheet: The United States and Central America: Honoring Our Commitments,” The White House, January 14, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/15/fact-sheet-united-states-and-central-america-honoring-our-commitments>.

<sup>190</sup> The White House, “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.”

<sup>191</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Scenesetter for Vice President Biden’s Visit to Guatemala March 2–4, 2015.”

<sup>192</sup> “Remarks With Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom,” U.S. Department of State, March 5, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/03/137957.htm>.

her admission that the United States was “part of the problem”<sup>193</sup> in Guatemala’s drug violence that drew headlines. In a broadcast from *Prensa Libre*, one of Guatemala’s top media agencies, it only quoted Clinton saying, “We know we are part of the problem. And that’s an admission that we have been willing to make this past year and it’s one of the reasons why we feel so strongly about trying to help countries like Guatemala fight this terrible criminal scourge.”<sup>194</sup> In an online op-ed from *La Hora* newspaper, the first two lines read, “We know we are part of the problem.”<sup>195</sup> Though Clinton emphasized combatting crime, this media coverage diminished Guatemala’s own role in narco-trafficking and violence within its own country; based on Clinton’s initial speech, it was likely not the desired U.S. message for her visit.

Clinton traveled to Guatemala once again in June 2011 as part of the Central American Security Conference. Given the topic of the event, Clinton’s remarks centered on security in the region, but there were two marked differences in this speech compared to 2010. First, she ensured to continually underscore the “shared responsibility” in regional security issues (in the first three paragraphs of her speech, she says the word “shared” six times), thus minimizing the chances that the media would single out the United States’ role in increasing regional violence. This time, *La Prensa* broadcasted, “Clinton announces more help from the U.S. to Central America,”<sup>196</sup> and on the front page of *La Hora*, a picture of Clinton with her team accompanied a headline that read, “Latin America and developed countries make mutual demands: narco monopolizes summit agenda.”<sup>197</sup> Secondly, Clinton also emphasized democratic rule of law during her visit; she spotlighted Guatemala’s partnership with CICIG to confront corruption and impunity and, more

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<sup>193</sup> U.S. Department of State.

<sup>194</sup> *Secretaria de Estado de EE. UU. Visita Guatemala* [Secretary of State Visits Guatemala] (Guatemala City, Guatemala: Prensa Libre, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ul3Fi8w8BE>.

<sup>195</sup> Roberto Arias, “¡¡Hola y adiós Hillary!!,” [Hello and Goodbye Hillary!] *The Hora*, March 6, 2010, <https://lahora.gt/hemeroteca-lh/hola-y-adios-hillary/>.

<sup>196</sup> *Clinton Anuncia Más Ayuda de EE.UU. a América Central* [Clinton Announces more U.S. aid to Central America] (Guatemala City, Guatemala: Prensa Libre, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rI-hYtQV6c>.

<sup>197</sup> “Latino América y Países Desarrollados Se Exigen Mutuamente: El Narco Acapara Agenda de Cumbre,” [Latin American and Developed Nations Demand Mutually: Narco Monopolizes Summit Agenda] *La Hora*, June 22, 2011.

symbolically, the first representative from the Guatemalan government that she met with was during a photo opportunity with Claudia Paz y Paz, the country's attorney general.<sup>198</sup>

In Biden's three trips to Guatemala, he expanded on Clinton's narrative and then echoed the interconnected and interdependent nature of prosperity, governance, and security outlined in the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. In June 2014, Biden flew to Guatemala to meet with representatives from the Northern Triangle to address the surge of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border. Given the urgency of the problem at hand, Biden used strong and emotive language to speak and connect directly to the citizens of the region. He said, "There is nothing humane about what these traffickers are doing. And I can't imagine a parent, the desperation they must feel to hand your daughter over to one of these thugs, these criminals. But it's clear we have to deal with the root causes, the root causes of what drives people."<sup>199</sup> It was also during this speech that he announced, "work to counter and correct the misinformation smugglers are propagating about U.S. immigration policy, and discourage families from sending their children on this perilous journey."

Biden's tone changed during his March 2015 visit to Guatemala's capital. Once again, he visited the region to address irregular migration, specifically to work with Northern Triangle leaders on their jointly created A4P. Unlike his last visit in 2014, his speech was mainly directed to government elites and potential business investors. He explained, "It's in our self-interest, and I would suggest—respectfully suggest yours—to help them find jobs and physical security. Because the people who tend to leave are the people with the most talent. The people who tend to leave are the people who can be the greatest—make the greatest contributions to a community. And if we don't do this, all of us will feel the consequences."<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, the only instance he specifically

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<sup>198</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Schedule for Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton" (U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act, June 22, 2011), [www.foia.state.gov](http://www.foia.state.gov).

<sup>199</sup> "Remarks to the Press with Q&A by Vice President Joe Biden in Guatemala," The White House, June 20, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/20/remarks-press-qa-vice-president-joe-biden-guatemala>.

<sup>200</sup> "Vice President Biden Speaks in Guatemala about Investing in Central America," The White House, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/node/324941>.

highlighted Guatemala was to emphasize its work to “remove senior officials suspected of corruption and aiding human trafficking...[and] ending business disputes to clear the way for new investment.”<sup>201</sup> During his time in Guatemala, he visited a Model Police Precinct and spoke with at-risk youth.<sup>202</sup> Additionally, he met with Guatemalan civil society members, which, according to an embassy memorandum, was to “underscore U.S. support for human rights and rule-of-law, including our support for extending the UN’s [CICIG] mandate past 2015.”<sup>203</sup> Based on the content of his speeches and the fact that only Biden, and not Clinton, met with civil Guatemalan groups, it appears the United States was putting additional emphasis over time on influencing the Guatemalan public to trust democratic rule of law and to stop migration north.

This stress on fighting corruption and supporting rule of law would carry through into Biden’s next visit to Guatemala in January 2016 during the inauguration of President Jimmy Morales. A political outsider and former comedian, Morales won the presidency with 67.4 percent of the vote.<sup>204</sup> Only months prior, in September 2015, the preceding Guatemalan president, Otto Pérez Molina resigned amid the La Linea corruption scandal initially uncovered by the CICIG. Thus, it is not surprising that Biden said, “I truly believe that the next great success story in this hemisphere can be the Northern Triangle -- Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. As I told your colleagues for the last three years, the single biggest impediment for that success is corruption.” He went on to discuss his country’s commitment to reducing irregular migration, noting that the United States had given \$750 million to help the Northern Triangle countries, but that it had one caveat: “And so we are in this with you. As long as you continue to meet your commitments—and you have thus far—we are all in.” These visits from Biden demonstrate the transition of the

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<sup>201</sup> “Vice President Biden Speaks in Guatemala about Investing in Central America.”

<sup>202</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Scenesetter for Vice President Biden’s Visit to Guatemala March 2–4, 2015.”

<sup>203</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala.

<sup>204</sup> “Jimmy Morales Gana La Presidencia al Primer Intento,” Prensa Libre, October 25, 2015, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/decision-libre-2015/jimmy-morales-gana-la-presidencia-al-primer-intento/>.

United States' policy and public diplomacy from focusing on combatting narcotrafficking to prioritizing the importance of CICIG and curbing irregular migration.

#### **D. U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION**

The U.S. Embassy in Guatemala's use of strategic communication through conventional and social media would also shift between 2009 and 2016; in this case, the embassy's messaging would become more concise and more integrated with U.S. policy. Prior to 2014, the U.S. loosely tied its communication to the four U.S. priorities: increasing citizen security, boosting economic prosperity, supporting rule of law through CICIG, and reducing irregular migration. Then, in 2014, there was an increased focus on targeting government corruption—likely because of the 2015 La Linea corruption scandal—and on the latter three priorities. The embassy rarely shared information on security programs, or, if it did, it often branded them as development initiatives. Concerning the Guatemalan public, television and radio were the most popular ways they received information, though internet usage increased significantly during this time period.

With conventional media, interviews from U.S. Ambassadors Arnold Chacón and Todd Robinson between 2011 and 2016 demonstrate how U.S. strategic messaging became more integrated with U.S. policy. During Chacón's tenure, he appeared to mainly focus on economic assistance to alleviate poverty. In a 2011 online video interview with *Presna Libre*, when asked about the biggest challenges in Guatemala, he said, "What worries me the most is the malnutrition, the poverty, that affects a great part of the country."<sup>205</sup> While he also spoke about natural disasters and the possibility of TPS for Guatemalans, it is worth noting what he did not mention: corruption, security, or rule of law. During a February 2012 on-camera interview with *GuateVision*, Chacón once more did not speak about U.S. priorities when asked to comment on the Guatemalan initiative to decriminalize drugs; Chacon simply replied, "This will not affect our desire to help Guatemala in what is

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<sup>205</sup> *Entrevista Con Arnold Chacón* [Interview with Arnold Chacón] (Prensa Libre, 2011), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJg2rZO\\_b8w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJg2rZO_b8w).

important.”<sup>206</sup> Lastly, in December of that same year, he again only focused on poverty and USAID programs during a *La Prensa* print interview commemorating the change in the Mayan calendar.<sup>207</sup> It is clear Chacón prioritized using the media to speak with the Guatemalan public; however, most of his messaging lacked a clear connection to U.S. policy concerns in the region.

The content of U.S. strategic communication changed in 2014 upon the arrival of Robinson. From 2014 to 2016, he took a more succinct and cohesive (and sometimes blunt) stance when speaking about U.S. initiatives and challenges to reduce both corruption and impunity. In June 2015, as the country reeled from the La Linea corruption scandal, Robinson reiterated on several occasions U.S. support for judicial processes and a transparent government.<sup>208</sup> In an extensive interview with *Nómada*, he said, “My first words in the country, when I arrived, were against corruption; for transparency; better justice; more secure markets for both local and foreign entrepreneurs and my support for CICIG. This hasn’t changed.”<sup>209</sup> Even during celebratory events, Robinson continued to concentrate on democratic rule of law. For example, in a *Soy502* print interview on July 4, 2016, as he handed out candy to embassy guests he declared, “Guatemala demonstrated commitment to rebuilding and strengthening democratic institutions.”<sup>210</sup> Though Robinson did concisely communicate most of his country’s priorities, like his predecessor

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<sup>206</sup> Ambient Worlds, *15 02 12 GUATEVISION 9PM Arnold Chacón Comenta Que La Despenalización de La Droga No Afectará Ayudas Dispuestas Por EE UU Para Nuestro País*, [Arnold Chacón comments that drug depenalization will not affect U.S. aid to our country] 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHtEVmVy2wM>.

<sup>207</sup> Prensa Libre, “Embajador estadounidense dirige mensaje en ocasión del cambio de era [U.S. Ambassador directs message on change in era],” Prensa Libre, December 21, 2012, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/politica/guatemala-13-baktun-arnold-chacon-cambio-de-era-estados-unidos-0-832716848/>.

<sup>208</sup> “El embajador: ‘Yo no mando en Guatemala,’” [Ambassador: I do not command Guatemala] *Nómada*, June 10, 2015, <https://nomada.gt/pais/entender-la-politica/el-embajador-yo-no-mando-en-guatemala/>; “Embajador Todd Robinson insiste en llevar protestas al Congreso,” [Ambassador Todd Robinson insists on pursuing protests to Congress] *Soy502*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.soy502.com/articulo/embajador-todd-robinson-insiste-llevar-protestas-al-congreso>.

<sup>209</sup> “El embajador.”

<sup>210</sup> “Todd Robinson reparte dulces y chicles al estilo Chicago,” [Todd Robinson gives away Chicago-style sweets and gum] *Soy502*, June 29, 2016, <https://www.soy502.com/articulo/embajador-todd-robinson-celebra-independencia-eeuu-50172>.



Chacón, he once more neglected to speak about security. There are two potential reasons for the omittance. First, the United States wanted to distance itself from the legacy of the 36-year civil war from 1960 to 1996, during which armed forces committed numerous human rights abuses.<sup>211</sup> Second, the U.S. Embassy simply did not seek to meld its security initiatives with its other communication efforts. Instead, they grouped those programs under development projects. In a research interview conducted by Nicholas Phillips, a USAID official said, “There’s no CARSI branding or marketing plan, so even if we wanted to brand something as ‘CARSI,’ we wouldn’t have the tools to do so.”<sup>212</sup> Phillips continues, that in a 2014 USAID presentation on CARSI-funded crime prevention programming, “CARSI did not appear anywhere in the slideshow.”<sup>213</sup> The U.S. agencies in charge of CARSI programs may have wanted to simplify its messaging and saw no reason to integrate security messages with those on development.

Not only did U.S. strategic communication to Guatemalans shift in conventional media, but it also transitioned in its use of social media between 2009 and 2016. During this time, it changed from using social media primarily to share optimistic stories and information to increasing overall communication to connect with Guatemalans, with an emphasis on building trust for CICIG and distributing information on migration. For example, in 2011, the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala’s Facebook created a photo campaign called, “Un Momento en Mi Mundo” (A Moment in my World), where Guatemalans entered their own content to be highlighted online; the winners of the contest were then invited to the embassy for a cultural event.<sup>214</sup> In the summer of 2014, it ran a trivia contest

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<sup>211</sup> González, “The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).”

<sup>212</sup> Nicholas Phillips, “CARSI in Guatemala: Progress, Failure, and Uncertainty,” *Wilson Center - Latin American Program*, September 2014, 53.

<sup>213</sup> Phillips.

<sup>214</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Ganadores Del Concurso de Fotografía ‘Un Momento En Mi Mundo’ Reciben Diploma de Reconocimiento Del Embajador Arnold Chacón, Durante La Inauguración de La Exposición Fotográfica ‘50 Años de Powwow,’” [‘A moment in my life’ photo contest winners receive certificate from Ambassador Arnold Chacon during photo exposition] Facebook, October 3, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/Embajada.EEUU.Guatemala/photos/a.10150292754477587/10150308668557587>.

about soccer during the men’s World Cup tournament.<sup>215</sup> Though this trivia contest was entertaining, it is unusual given that this contest was occurring simultaneously with the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, which the embassy did not mention on their Facebook page. The lack of correlation with U.S. policies on the embassy’s social media pages changed in 2014, when it began to interact more with its online audience, which sought to build trust in CICIG and share more information on how to immigrate legally. For example, in July 2015, the embassy wrote, “The government of the United States strongly supports the efforts of [CICIG],”<sup>216</sup> which received a higher engagement rate based on increased “likes” and comments compared to other posts around the same month. Furthermore, Robinson began a popular series on the embassy Facebook page where he signed on for “chats” to answer questions from the community and to highlight his priorities. These posts would usually garner hundreds of comments and allowed Robinson to communicate unfiltered messages to the public.<sup>217</sup> Additionally, in August 2016, the embassy posted more than 20 videos on legal migration to their YouTube channel, which would serve to counter misinformation on immigrating to the United States.<sup>218</sup> This shift in strategic communication on social media is likely for two reasons: First, internet usage increased across the country and thus, more people would be on social media platforms. While

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<sup>215</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Con Motivo de La Copa Mundial de Fútbol Brasil 2014, Contagiados de La Emoción y Con El Afán de Compartir Este Evento de Alcance Mundial Con Nuestros Fans En Facebook, Hemos Organizado Esta ‘Quinie-Trivia Del Fútbol En Los Estados Unidos’ En La Que Podrán Probar Su Habilidad de Predicción y Demostrar Sus Conocimientos Acerca de La Historia y Actualidad Del Fútbol En EE.UU.,” Facebook, June 3, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/Embajada.EEUU.Guatemala/photos/a.10150246685262587/10152069563487587>.

<sup>216</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “El Gobierno de Los Estados Unidos Apoya Fuertemente Los Esfuerzos de La Comisión Internacional Contra La Impunidad En Guatemala (CICIG),” [U.S. Government Strongly Supports CICIG efforts] Facebook, July 22, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/Embajada.EEUU.Guatemala/photos/a.10150246685262587/10152892033537587>.

<sup>217</sup> U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “Charla Con El Embajador Todd Robinson,” [Chat with Ambassador Todd Robinson] Facebook, November 24, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/Embajada.EEUU.Guatemala/photos/a.10150246685262587/10152402582712587>; U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, “¡Muy Buenos Días Para Todos y Todas!,” [Good day to everyone!] Facebook, June 28, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/Embajada.EEUU.Guatemala/photos/a.10150246685262587/10152904540287587>.

<sup>218</sup> Some examples include: U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, *¿Cuál Es La Diferencia Entre “Salida Voluntaria” y “Deportación”?* [What is the difference between “Voluntary Exit” and “Deportation”?] 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQIB4vDPUiM>; U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, *¿Se Puede Coordinar Una Cita de Grupo Para La Entrevista de Visa?* [Can you coordinate a group meeting for visa interview?] 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyKpk4-9\\_1A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyKpk4-9_1A).

television and radio remained the more prominent information source, the percentage of Guatemalans with internet access increased from 10.5 percent in 2010 to 35.5 percent in 2015.<sup>219</sup> Second, Robinson valued social media as a communication tool. He was the first U.S. ambassador in Guatemala to develop an online presence specifically to communicate with the local public. Simply based on how much time and effort he took to answering questions on the social media pages, it illustrates that he prioritized the medium to connect with Guatemalans, especially when seeking to shape support for CICIG and reduce irregular migration.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

When seeking to understand why the U.S. varied its public diplomacy in Guatemala between 2009 and 2016, because of Guatemalan government corruption, the United States endeavored to shape Guatemalans' attitudes toward rule of law, economic prosperity, violence reduction, and immigration. As Biden said in his 2016 speech, "The single biggest impediment for ... success is corruption." The United States saw it as a hindrance in economic practices and in its security partnerships. As corruption scandals emerged, the United States increased its volume of support for CICIG on the public sphere to build trust in the commission. By 2014, the United States saw corruption as a causal factor in the violence that forcing thousands of Guatemalans to send their children north.

This chapter used high-level speeches and strategic communication to demonstrate how the United States began to emphasize the public more and seek more opportunities to connect from 2009 to 2016. Whether that was through meetings with civic organizations or by taking more time to speak with the public on Facebook page, these PD efforts sought to counter government corruption to build trust in rule of law and reduce irregular migration.

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<sup>219</sup> "Guatemala," Media Landscapes, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/guatemala/>; "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - Guatemala," The World Bank, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=GT>.

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## **V. CONCLUSION: EXPLAINING VARIATIONS IN U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA’S NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

This thesis utilized a soft power framework to examine U.S. public diplomacy (PD) efforts in Central America’s Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—between 2009 and 2016. I considered U.S. foreign policy addressing each of the three countries and then analyzed complementary U.S. PD efforts. I conclude that during this period, U.S. foreign policy goals were relatively consistent across the Northern Triangle, but that soft power initiatives to support democracy resulted in important variations of U.S. PD. These initiatives included strengthening the U.S. relationship with the host country’s executive branch (El Salvador), reestablishing democracy after a coup d’état (Honduras), and combatting corruption at the highest levels of government (Guatemala). This chapter provides summaries of the soft power public diplomacy framework—Soft Power and Smart Power—and of the three case studies on the Northern Triangle countries. I then provide alternative explanations and areas for further research. Finally, given the recent inauguration of President Joe Biden, who had taken an active role in U.S. diplomatic initiatives in the Northern Triangle between 2009 and 2016, I provide potential PD recommendations as he seeks to shape, attract, or persuade target audiences in the Northern Triangle.

### **B. SOFT POWER AND SMART POWER PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

The foundational assumption of this thesis is that PD is a critical tool in a country’s soft power arsenal. According to Joseph Nye, “This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.”<sup>220</sup> Soft power PD is essentially the use of communication to influence foreign audiences so that they “want what you want.” Soft power scholars are divided into two schools of thought: Soft Power PD and Smart Power PD. Soft Power PD concentrates on attracting audiences to particular

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<sup>220</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 95.

cultural or political values, with an ultimate goal of shaping their country's policies. Smart Power PD, introduced in the early 2000s, more closely integrates hard and soft power "in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actor's purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently."<sup>221</sup> In short, Soft Power PD often maintains a distance from hard power initiatives whereas Smart Power PD aims to integrate and balance the two types of power, hard and soft.

Because of the close economic, security, and cultural ties between the United States and the countries in Central America's Northern Triangle, the soft power approach to PD offered an appropriate lens to evaluate U.S. PD efforts in the region between 2009 and 2016. Indeed, my research found that the United States regularly used PD to persuade or attract Central American publics to support its foreign policy objectives. The evidence indicates that U.S. soft power initiatives to support democracy shaped the variation in U.S. PD efforts across the Northern Triangle. These soft power initiatives were unique to each country and were primarily driven by domestic political conditions. Furthermore, during the observed timeframe, global telecommunications were expanding, which offered an opportunity to understand how the United States varied its PD through the adoption of social media "digital diplomacy," as more foreign audiences moved online to communicate.

In 2014, Central America's Northern Triangle entered the U.S. media news cycle because of the surge of unaccompanied minors from that region at the U.S.-Mexico border. Between October 2013 and June 2014, more than 52,000 minors arrived at the border, initiating U.S. policy responses and separate communication campaigns to deter further migration.<sup>222</sup> Based on the tone of U.S. media coverage, it might be assumed that the United States employs the same policy plans and PD tactics not solely concerning irregular

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<sup>221</sup> Ernest J. Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 116.

<sup>222</sup> "Unaccompanied Minors," Pub. L. No. HRG-2014-HSC-0030, § Committee on Homeland Security. House (2014), <https://congressional-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/congressional/result/congressional/congdocumentview?accountid=12702&groupid=100340&parmId=1778402F045#1900>.

migration, but for all its policies.<sup>223</sup> From a global perspective, U.S. foreign policy in Central America, in fact, was similar. For example, all three countries were part of the Dominican Republic–Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), as well as received funds through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Yet, taking a closer look at specific plans and goals reveals that the United States faced different policy challenges within the three countries. With CAFTA-DR, the United States dealt with a labor law dispute in Guatemala; with CARSI, its governing documents specifically outlined different parameters for funding to Honduras and Guatemala due to respective rule of law and human rights abuses. These variations in policy alone do not provide enough evidence of why the United States might vary its PD. The following summary of the three cases studies shows that the U.S. soft power initiatives to support democracy shaped the variations in U.S. PD efforts to attract or persuade its foreign audiences between 2009 and 2016.

### **C. EL SALVADOR: STRENGTHENING THE U.S.-SALVADORAN RELATIONSHIP**

In El Salvador, the United States shifted its policy from an emphasis on bi-lateral relations (mainly through the Salvadoran-specific aid package called the Partnership for Growth) to a whole-of-region approach via the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Between 2009 and 2016, combatting crime, increasing economic prosperity, and reducing irregular migration took the top spots as U.S. policy priorities. In the public sphere, the United States utilized its soft power to solidify the U.S.-El Salvador relationship, especially with its Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) President Mauricio Funes. Since the FMLN was left-leaning and had ties to the guerilla forces that fought the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government in the 1980s, there were concerns that the United States would distance itself from the new administration. Thus, the United States sought to temper

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<sup>223</sup> Amanda Taub, “The Violence Driving the Child-Refugee Crisis,” Vox, June 30, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/6/30/5842054/violence-in-central-america-and-the-child-refugee-crisis>; “Obama Warns Central Americans: ‘Do Not Send Your Children To The Borders,’” ABC News, June 26, 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063>; Alan Greenblatt, “What’s Causing The Latest Immigration Crisis? A Brief Explainer,” NPR, July 9, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/09/329848538/whats-causing-the-latest-immigration-crisis-a-brief-explainer>.

those apprehensions. An official visit from President Barack Obama in 2011 most exemplifies this goal. Given that El Salvador was the only country in the Northern Triangle that Obama visited during his two terms in office, the visit signified that the United States desired to establish support for its relationship with El Salvador. Furthermore, Obama also joined Funes at Monsignor Romero's grave, an important historic symbol from the Salvadoran Civil War, during which government forces fought the FMLN from 1980 to 1992.

Once the United States appeared to establish the relationship with the Salvadoran executive branch in 2013, it shifted its focus to economic investment, democratic processes, and a commitment to joint security initiatives. Simultaneously, Salvadorans began to increasingly use the internet to communicate; while the percentage of the local population using the internet never exceeded 25 percent, the United States did expand to its social media PD to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Via these online communications, they used soft power campaigns to inspire national pride in Salvadorans with the goal of deterring them from migrating north.

#### **D. HONDURAS: DEALING WITH THE EFFECTS OF THE MILITARY COUP**

In Honduras, the military coup d'état in June 2009 that ousted President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya defined U.S. policy PD efforts between 2009 and 2016. The United States lacked clear policy and direction when it dealt with the coup, hindering the influence of the United States to reinstate a democratic government. Thus, the coup impacted U.S. PD efforts in two ways: First, because the United States did not want to give credence to the ousters, from 2010 to 2012, it publicly distanced itself from both the new president and the Honduran population; second, in the wake of the coup, the new government severely limited freedom of expression, censoring what few messages the United States did try to communicate to Hondurans via the news media.

Even after the Hondurans democratically elected a new president, the United States still struggled to engage in its security and economic programs because of challenges to democratic rule of law and respect for human rights. The visit from then-Vice President



Joe Biden in 2012 demonstrates this tension. His visit indicated U.S. support for the Honduran government, yet during his short time in country, he did not engage with civil society or members of the public, which was different compared to Obama's visit to El Salvador, as well as Biden's three visits to Guatemala during the same timeframe.

The United States attempted to use strategic communication through traditional and social media to integrate within U.S. policy, especially to build support for democratic rule of law and deter irregular migration. Yet, because of continued limitations to press freedom and the small percentage of Hondurans that used the internet, U.S. messaging likely did not reach as many members of the public as desired.

#### **E. GUATEMALA: GENERATING SUPPORT TO COMBAT CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY**

High-level government corruption colored U.S. policy and its complementary PD efforts in Guatemala between 2009 and 2016. While the United States did emphasize security and economic prosperity in its policies, its support for the United Nations-led International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was the priority in both the private and public diplomatic spheres. Later, in 2014, the United States also dedicated more policy and PD resources to reducing irregular migration. As stated earlier, Biden visited Guatemala three times during that seven-year period. He met with leaders from the other two Northern Triangle countries during those visits, mostly to discuss the Alliance for Prosperity as part of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, and his public remarks centered on economic development to deter migration. Unlike his visit to Honduras, however, he also added engagements with civil society and the public, indicating that the U.S. valued interactions with the public to achieve its policy goals. Of note, Biden never emphasized the historic legacy of the 36-year Civil War that ended in 1996. Additionally, after the resignation of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina in 2015, Biden's visit for the inauguration of the next president, Jimmy Morales, reinforced the U.S. priority to oppose corruption and fight impunity.

In regard to combatting irregular migration through strategic communication, the U.S. Embassy increased its use of social media to share information on the visa process as well as boosted its two-way communication with Guatemalans. Of all the U.S. Embassies

in the Northern Triangle, the embassy in Guatemala posted the most information about how to legally immigrate to the United States on its social media websites. This broadening of communication also coincided with the arrival of U.S. Ambassador Todd Robinson, who, compared to both his predecessors in-country as well as his counterparts in Honduras and Guatemala, utilized more internet communication to directly connect with the public. Throughout his tenure, Robinson used his soft power influence to not only provide information on the legal way to arrive in the United States, but he also continued to build public support for CICIG with hopes that it would pressure the Guatemalan government to keep it in place.

**F. KEY FINDING: U.S. SOFT POWER INITIATIVES EXPLAIN VARIANCE IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

Comparing the three case studies, U.S. soft power initiatives—and not smart power—varied U.S. PD in Central America’s Northern Triangle between 2009 and 2016. In El Salvador, the United States focused on strengthening the Funes-Obama relationship; in Honduras, the United States centered on reestablishing the presidency after the military coup; and in Guatemala, the United States prioritized fighting corruption and impunity at the highest levels of government, including the presidency. Furthermore, despite United States funding for security programs, rarely did the United States embed those initiatives (the hard power) with its other programs or PD actions.

**G. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION, LIMITATIONS TO RESEARCH, AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

While the findings of this research point to Soft Power PD factors that caused variation in U.S. communications in Central America’s Northern Triangle, there were, however, elements of Smart Power PD in U.S. efforts. Especially toward the end of the time period researched, U.S. PD had begun to display elements of more integrated soft and hard power elements. In all the countries, by 2015, the United States employed a blend of techniques to deter irregular migration, whether it was through national pride campaigns (El Salvador), support for democratic rule of law (Honduras and Guatemala), or advocacy for anti-corruption organizations (Guatemala), that were then partnered with increased

security at the U.S.-Mexico border. However, there is no conclusive evidence that the U.S. embassies in Central America's Northern Triangle were actively looking to balance their hard and soft power initiatives within their PD strategy; at the same time, it is important to note that the United States varied its PD based soft power initiatives, especially support for democracy.

Furthermore, there were some limitations in research. Interviews with U.S. Embassy personnel, a wider range of media sources, and surveys with the public would provide further evidence to support this conclusion about Soft Power PD. Lastly, this thesis did not research other potentially important actors, such as other governments or criminal organizations, and their communication objectives. As Nye wrote, "Conventional wisdom has always held that the state with the largest military prevails, but in an information age it may be the state (or nonstates) with the best story that wins."<sup>224</sup> This thesis only looked at the U.S. story, but analyzing the stories of the other actors would give researchers and policymakers a more comprehensive understanding of the information environment.

## **H. IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY**

At this time, the new Biden administration is once again dealing with a surge of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. According to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), in February 2021, there were "100,441 persons attempting entry along the Southwest border. This total represented a 28 percent increase over January 2021,"<sup>225</sup> and since October 2020, more than 29,000 unaccompanied minors hoped to gain entry into the United States.<sup>226</sup>

Thus, once again, the administration will likely seek to influence and persuade Central Americans from migrating north; an awareness of its previous practices could help in PD strategy development. Based on this research, it is important for the United States to

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<sup>224</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), xiii.

<sup>225</sup> "CBP Announces February 2021 Operational Update," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, March 10, 2021, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-announces-february-2021-operational-update>.

<sup>226</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

understand that a dichotomy between messaging and policy could lead to confusion amongst the publics it hopes to shape. This is especially challenging because the Biden administration is seeking to distance itself from former President Donald Trump and his immigration policies, but in doing so, it might be giving the perception that the United States will now accept all who wish to immigrate.<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, I recommend promoting messaging beyond the positive “soft” messages on U.S. culture and values: as seen on the U.S. Embassy’s social media pages in El Salvador 2013, it was communicating positive messages about visiting the United States while also pursuing policy goals of reducing irregular migration. Nor is it recommended, however, that the United States stay silent in the public sphere on the crises, as was the case of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala in June 2014.

Beyond the implications for future U.S. PD in combatting irregular migration, the United States will also be contending with the potential damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of populism in the Northern Triangle, and the rise of counternarratives from other great powers. Between 2009 and 2016, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras each dealt with their own challenges to rule of law, corruption, crime, and economics; irregular migration is a symptom of those challenges and it is recommended that the United States continues to target those issues in concert with any migration foreign policy and corresponding public diplomacy efforts.

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<sup>227</sup> Franco Ordoñez, “‘The Border Is Not Open’: Biden Administration Seeks Foreign Aid To Slow Migration,” NPR, March 10, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/10/975758760/the-border-is-not-open-biden-administration-seeks-foreign-aid-to-slow-migration>.

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