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# From Civil War to ‘Civil Society’: Has the End of the Cold War Brought Peace to Central America?

[Jenny Pearce](#)

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**Abstract**

Revisiting one arena of the Cold War—Central America—which dominated international headlines in the 1980s, this article explores its legacy on the region. It asks whether the ending of the Cold War and the peace accords which concluded the internal wars of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala in 1990, 1992 and 1996, respectively, have brought sustainable peace, development and democracy. In particular, it explores the changing agenda of international financial and development agencies which have supported the postwar reconstruction of the region. The experiences of Nicaragua and El Salvador have shown that failure to coordinate the efforts at economic adjustment with those of peace-building compromised the possibilities of development and democratization, particularly for the poorest sectors of the population. Conservative elites who emerged intact from the war were able to consolidate their economic power, and resist and limit political reform, while handing responsibility for the poor and the former war zones to international agencies. The latter have shifted their agenda in the Guatemalan peace process, incorporating a strategy of ‘civil society strengthening’ in order to build capacity within society to create more accountable and democratic states.

The conclusion of the article explores the ambiguities of this strategy. On the positive side it legitimizes and protects the newly won but fragile freedoms of speech and association in the region; on the negative side, it risks turning a historical social and political dynamic into externally funded ‘projects’ with limited sustainability, whose outcome many international agencies tend to assume they can shape to their own expectations.

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