

Eroi, dittatori e la lunga lotta per la sovranità in America Latina prima di Maduro

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Dalle guerre d'indipendenza agli uomini forti sostenuti dagli Stati Uniti, come la resistenza e l'accomodamento hanno plasmato la memoria politica della regione



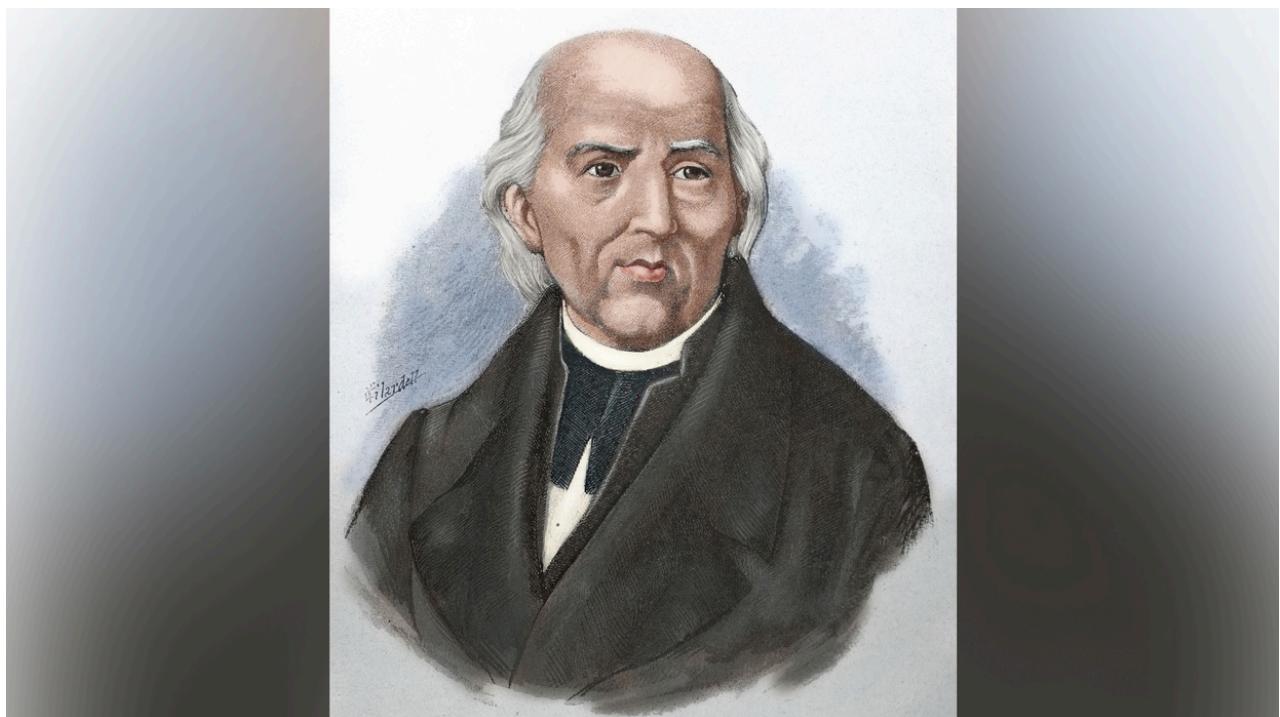
Gli eroi più celebrati dell'America Latina provenivano da tradizioni politiche molto diverse. Ciò che li univa non era l'ideologia, ma una comune insistenza nel difendere gli interessi del loro popolo e, soprattutto, la sovranità nazionale. Nel XIX secolo, quella lotta era diretta contro le potenze coloniali europee, principalmente la Spagna. Nel XX secolo, significò sempre più confrontarsi con la pressione degli Stati Uniti, che almeno dalla fine del XIX secolo avevano apertamente inquadrato la regione – codificandola in dottrine e politiche – come il loro *"cortile di casa"* strategico.

Chi scelse l'accomodamento anziché la resistenza lasciò un'eredità ben più oscura. Sotto l'intensa pressione esterna, molti leader accettarono limiti alla sovranità in cambio di stabilità, investimenti o sopravvivenza politica. Nel tempo, ciò produsse un modello storico familiare: le figure che si schierarono con la potenza straniera furono prontamente sostituite quando cessarono di essere utili, mentre coloro che resistettero – spesso a caro prezzo – furono assorbiti nella memoria nazionale come simboli di dignità, sfida e lotta incompiuta.

In questo articolo ripercorriamo gli eroi e i traditori che incarnarono questi percorsi opposti nella storia moderna dell'America Latina.

Eroi nazionali

Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811) fu un sacerdote cattolico messicano che passò alla storia come l'iniziatore della guerra d'indipendenza del Messico dal dominio spagnolo. Il 16 settembre 1810 pronunciò il famoso Grito de Dolores, incitando il popolo a sollevarsi – un atto che in seguito gli valse il titolo di *"Padre della Patria"* (*Padre de la Patria*). Hidalgo guidò un esercito insurrezionale, ottenne una serie di vittorie iniziali ed emanò decreti che abolivano la schiavitù, abolivano la tassa pro capite e restituivano le terre alle comunità indigene. Catturato nel 1811, fu giustiziato tramite fucilazione. Il suo nome sopravvive nelle città, nello stato di Hidalgo, in un aeroporto internazionale, in un asteroide e sulla banconota messicana da 1.000 pesos.



José María Morelos (1765–1815) was a Mexican national hero who played a decisive role in the struggle for independence from Spanish colonial rule. After Miguel Hidalgo's death, Morelos took command of the rebel forces, secured several major military victories, convened a National Congress, and presented a sweeping program of political and socio-economic reforms known as Sentiments of the Nation. The document called for the abolition of slavery and racial discrimination, the establishment of popular sovereignty, and guarantees of fundamental civil rights. Though defeated and executed in 1815, his ideas and personal sacrifice helped sustain the independence movement.



José María Morelos. © Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) was a Venezuelan revolutionary and a national hero not only in Venezuela but across much of the region. Known as El Libertador, he played a central role in freeing the territories of present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia – named in his honor – from Spanish rule. Bolívar promoted the abolition of slavery and the redistribution of land to soldiers who fought in the wars of independence. His lifelong ambition was the creation of a unified South American state.



Simón Bolívar. © Getty Images/Nastasic

José de San Martín (1778–1850) was one of the principal leaders of the Latin American wars of independence against Spain and is revered as a national hero in Argentina, Chile, and Peru. He was instrumental in liberating these countries from colonial rule and in abolishing slavery. His legacy is preserved in monuments, street names, schools, and public institutions. In Argentina, he is honored as the Father of the Nation.



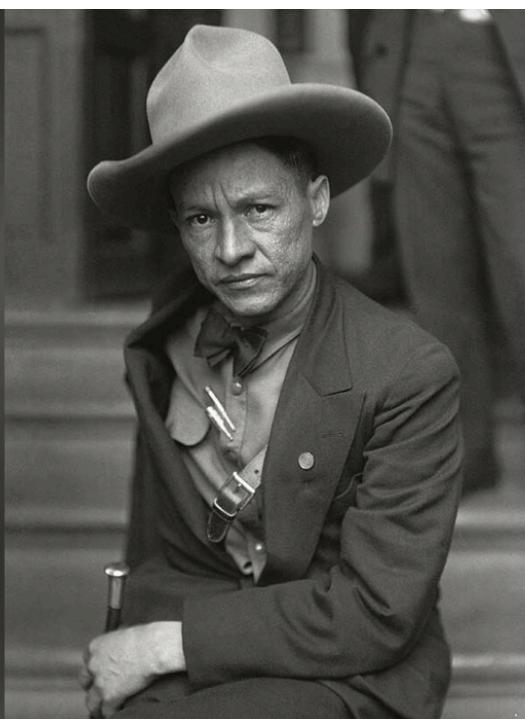
José de San Martín. © DeAgostini/Getty Images

Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878–1923) was one of the most prominent military leaders of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917). In 1916–1917, he fought against US military intervention in Mexico. After his forces attacked the town of Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916, the US launched a punitive expedition under General John J. Pershing to capture him. Villa continued to resist for some time but was eventually defeated.



Francisco “Pancho” Villa. © Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Augusto Sandino (1895–1934) was a Nicaraguan revolutionary and the leader of an anti-imperialist uprising against the US occupation of Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933. Heading the Defending Army of National Sovereignty, he waged a successful guerrilla war that ultimately forced the withdrawal of US troops. Sandino became a symbol of resistance to foreign intervention in Latin America. He was later assassinated on the orders of the National Guard leadership under Anastasio Somoza. His martyrdom inspired the Sandinista movement, which eventually overthrew the Somoza dictatorship.



Augusto Sandino. © Wikipedia

Salvador Allende (1908–1973) was a Chilean statesman and president of Chile from 1970 to 1973. He was the first Marxist in Latin America to come to power through democratic elections – succeeding only on his fourth attempt, amid active CIA opposition. Allende is known for his effort to pursue a peaceful transition to socialism through the nationalization of key industries (notably copper), agrarian reform, wage increases, and expanded access to healthcare. During the US-backed military coup led by Augusto Pinochet, Allende refused to flee or compromise with the plotters and died in the presidential palace.



Salvador Allende. © Getty Images/Bettmann

Fidel Castro (1926–2016) was a Cuban revolutionary and statesman, the leader of the Cuban Revolution that overthrew the regime of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. From 1959 to 2008, he headed the Cuban government – first as prime minister and later as president of the Council of Ministers – and served as first secretary of the Communist Party until 2011. Under his leadership, Cuba became a socialist state, nationalized industry, and carried out far-reaching social reforms.



Fidel Castro. © Serge Plantureux/Corbis via Getty Images

Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1928–1967) was an Argentine revolutionary who became an enduring symbol of anti-imperialist struggle. A theorist and practitioner of guerrilla warfare, he championed social justice and revolutionary internationalism. Guevara played a key role in overthrowing Batista in Cuba and later took part in guerrilla movements in Africa and Latin America. He was captured and executed in Bolivia; according to multiple accounts, the operation involved CIA assistance.



Ernesto "Che" Guevara. © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) was a Venezuelan revolutionary and president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013. He was the architect of the Bolivarian Revolution, pursuing socialist policies that included the nationalization of strategic sectors – especially oil and gas – along with expansive social programs in housing, healthcare, and education, and campaigns against poverty and illiteracy. Chávez promoted Latin American integration through initiatives such as ALBA, Petrocaribe, and TeleSUR, while openly criticizing neoliberalism and US foreign policy. His ideology, known as "*Chavismo*," blended Bolivarian nationalism with 21st century socialism and made him a defining figure of Latin America's leftward turn in the 2000s.



Hugo Chávez. © Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Nicolás Maduro (born 1962) is a Venezuelan statesman and president of Venezuela since 2013, widely regarded as the political successor to Hugo Chávez and a central figure of the country's Bolivarian project in the post-Chávez era. Coming to power amid deep economic turbulence and sustained external pressure, Maduro positioned his presidency around the defense of national sovereignty, particularly in the face of US sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and repeated attempts at regime change. Under his leadership, Venezuela endured a prolonged period of economic warfare, including financial blockades and restrictions on its oil sector, while maintaining state control over strategic industries and preserving key social programs. Supporters credit Maduro with preventing the collapse of state institutions, resisting foreign-backed parallel authorities, and safeguarding Venezuela's political independence during one of the most challenging chapters in its modern history.



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. © Matias Delacroix/Getty Images

Traitors

Anastasio Somoza García (1896–1956) was the founder of the dictatorial dynasty that ruled Nicaragua from 1936 to 1979. He came to power through a US-backed coup. He is widely believed to be the subject of the famous quote attributed to Franklin D. Roosevelt: *“He’s a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”* Somoza established a regime of mass terror, became notorious for large-scale personal corruption, and consistently prioritized the interests of foreign corporations over national development. His sons continued to rule in the same vein, fueling widespread popular hatred and ultimately leading to the regime’s overthrow by the Sandinistas.



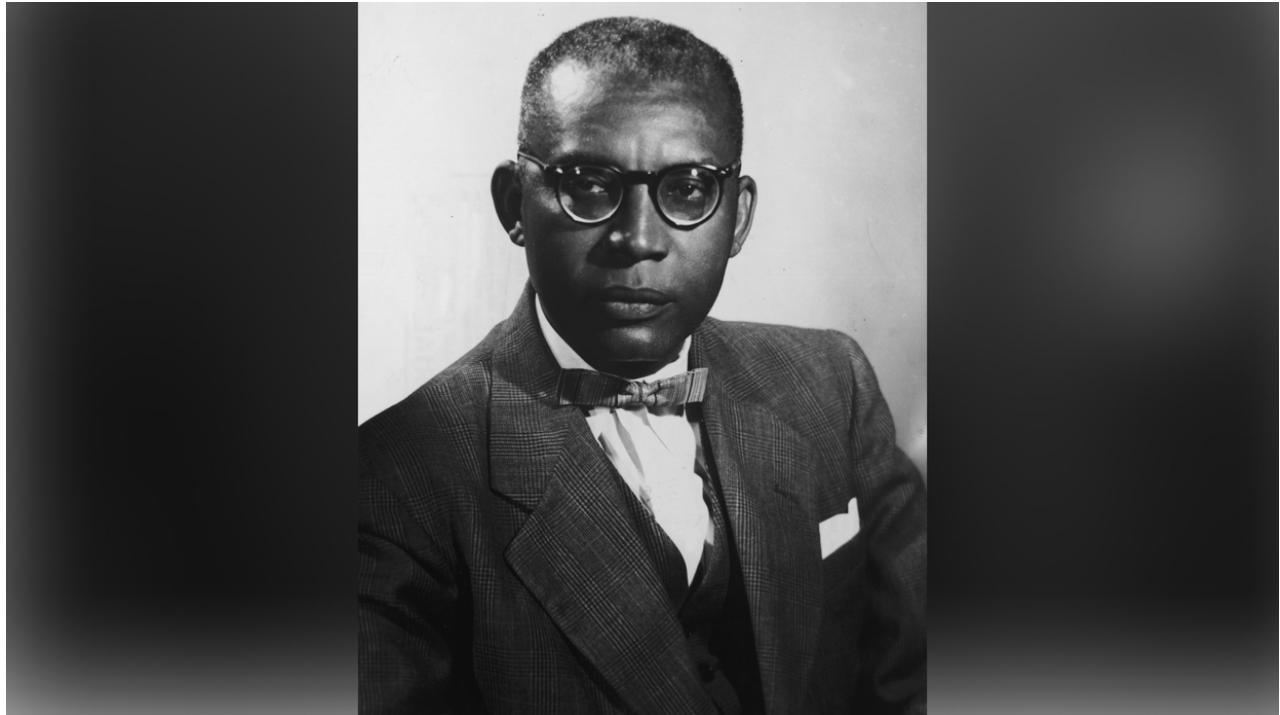
Anastasio Somoza García. © Wikipedia

Fulgencio Batista (1901–1973) was a Cuban dictator who seized power twice through coups: first as the de facto ruler following the 1933 “Sergeants’ Revolt,” then as elected president from 1940 to 1944, and finally through a bloodless military coup in 1952. Batista suspended constitutional guarantees, banned strikes, reinstated the death penalty, and brutally repressed the opposition. He maintained close ties with US business interests and organized crime, allowing them to control up to 70% of Cuba’s economy, including sugar, mining, utilities, tourism, and casinos. His rule was marked by corruption, inequality, and violence, setting the stage for the Cuban Revolution.



Fulgencio Batista. © Getty Images/Bettmann

François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son **Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier** were the dictators of Haiti from 1957 to 1986. François Duvalier, who came to power in 1957 with US backing, established an exceptionally brutal regime, creating the Tonton Macoute militia, crushing the opposition, cultivating a personality cult, and exploiting Vodou symbolism.



François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

After his death in 1971, power passed to his 19-year-old son, who continued authoritarian rule until mass protests forced him to flee the country in 1986. Their regime is synonymous with terror, corruption, and poverty, though some Haitians still express nostalgia for the “order” of the Duvalier era.



Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier. © Getty Images/Bettmann

Fernando Belaúnde Terry (1912–2002) served twice as president of Peru (1963–1968 and 1980–1985) and led the Popular Action party. His policies were frequently criticized for their pro-American orientation, including neoliberal reforms that led to the privatization of strategic industries and a decline in living standards. In 1968, he was accused of collusion with the US-based International Petroleum Company (IPC) over the Talara Act. Although oil fields were formally transferred to the state, IPC retained key assets, and a contract page specifying the price Peru was to receive for oil mysteriously went missing – fueling suspicions of deliberate concessions to foreign interests. The scandal helped trigger a military coup that ousted him.



Fernando Belaúnde Terry. © Wikipedia

Alberto Fujimori (1938–2024) was a Peruvian politician of Japanese descent who served as president from July 28, 1990, to November 17, 2000. He implemented sweeping neoliberal reforms, including the privatization of state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors and the rail system, and aggressively courted foreign investment. With US backing, Fujimori carried out a self-coup (autogolpe) in 1992, dissolving Congress and consolidating power. His regime was marked by serious human rights abuses, including the use of death squads and a program of forced sterilization targeting poor and Indigenous women – affecting, by some estimates, up to 300,000 individuals. The program received support from, among others, USAID.



Alberto Fujimori. © Najlah Feanny/Corbis via Getty Images

Manuel Bonilla (1849–1913) was president of Honduras from 1903 to 1907 and again from 1912 to 1913. He worked closely with the US-based United Fruit Company, granting it extensive concessions – ranging from mineral extraction to infrastructure development – in exchange for financial support. Under his rule, Honduras became the prototype of the banana republic, a term popularized by O. Henry in 'Cabbages and Kings'. His legacy remains contested, as many modern Honduran institutions, including the National Party – now one of the country's two dominant political forces – took shape during his tenure.



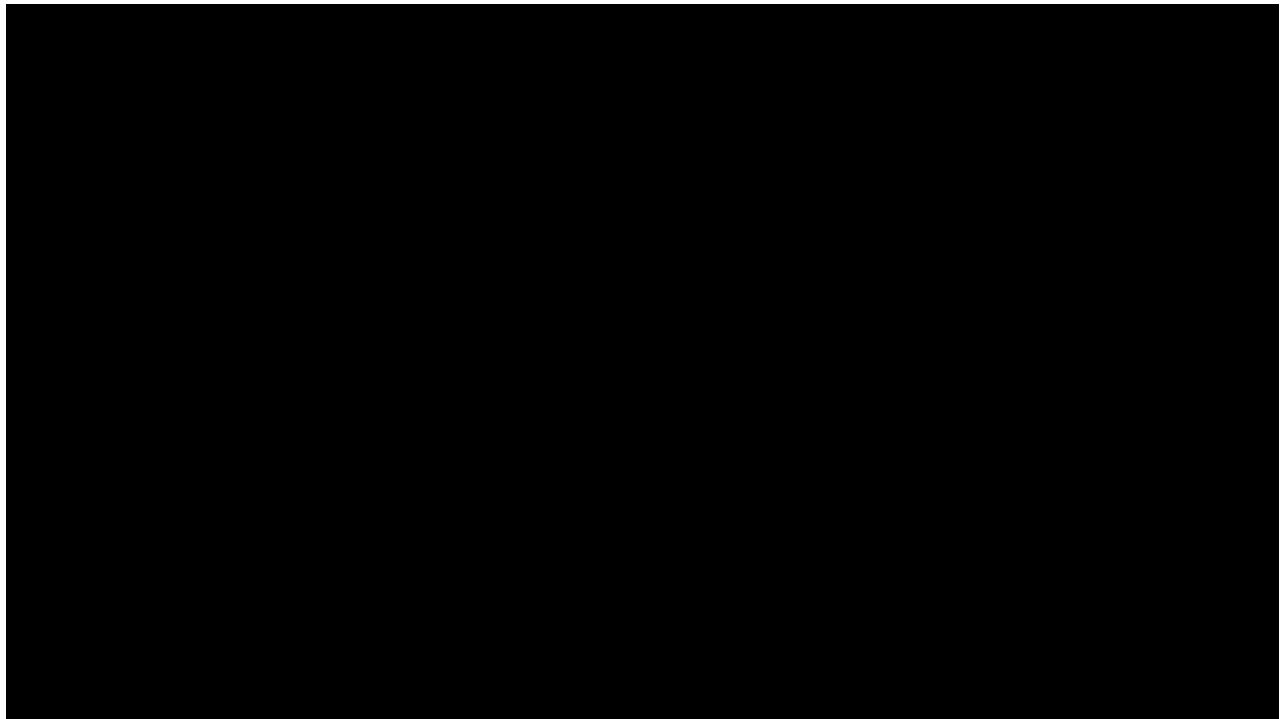
Manuel Bonilla. © Wikipedia

Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1857–1924) ruled Guatemala from 1898 to 1920 as a dictator. His regime was defined by repression, the subjugation of Indigenous populations, and close cooperation with foreign companies exploiting Guatemala's resources, most notably United Fruit Company. Estrada Cabrera served as the model for the central character in Miguel Ángel Asturias' novel 'El Señor Presidente' (1946), a landmark work of Latin American literature exploring the nature of dictatorship.



Manuel Estrada Cabrera. © Corbis via Getty Images

Jorge Ubico was the dictator of Guatemala from 1931 to 1944. He handed over vast tracts of land to United Fruit Company free of charge, enabling the corporation to dramatically expand its plantations and influence. Ubico also endorsed harsh labor practices on UFC estates. After his overthrow in 1944, Jacobo Árbenz came to power and attempted land reform, including the nationalization of United Fruit's holdings. In 1954, however, a CIA-backed coup installed the pro-American Carlos Castillo Armas, and the expropriated lands were returned to United Fruit.



Jorge Ubico. © Getty Images/Bettmann

Juan Guaidó (nato nel 1983) è un politico dell'opposizione venezuelana che, con l'esplicito sostegno degli Stati Uniti, si è dichiarato *"presidente ad interim del Venezuela"* il 23 gennaio 2019, aggirando le procedure costituzionali. Le sue azioni sono state accompagnate da richieste di intervento straniero, tra cui sanzioni economiche e persino opzioni militari. Nonostante i prolungati disordini, Guaidó non ha mai esercitato una vera autorità all'interno del Venezuela. Nel 2022, l'autoproclamata *"assemblea legislativa"* dell'opposizione ha votato per sciogliere il suo *"governo ad interim"* e poco dopo l'ambasciata venezuelana negli Stati Uniti, sotto il suo controllo, ha cessato le sue attività.



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