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978-0-521-45081-2 - Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas: State and Regime
in U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua, 1969-1981

Morris H. Morley

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Introduction: Permanent and transitory interests in U.S. foreign policy

Interpreting U.S. foreign policy toward the Third World: State versus regime

The practice of contemporary U.S. policy toward Latin America is shaped by three broad-based concerns: support for open economies and development strategies that accord private foreign banking and investment capital a key role; support for regimes prepared to align themselves with efforts to contain, and even roll back, the forces of national and social revolution; and a determination to safeguard America's strategic and "national security" interests in conformity with regional and global goals. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Washington policymakers pursued these inter-related political, economic, and strategic objectives in association with, or through, an assortment of military or military-controlled governments that dominated the political landscape of the region.

Toward the end of the 1970s, however, the United States was forced to come to terms with an emerging new reality: dictatorships that had lost their capacity to enforce controls over their populations – that is, had experienced a widespread erosion of political legitimacy; the collapse of the dominant economic model as it became increasingly incapable of responding to minimal class-based socioeconomic demands; and the appearance of mass-based, polyclass movements demanding a return to civilian rule. These developments forced the Carter, and subsequently Reagan, administrations to rethink the relationship between current strategies and broader policy objectives in the hemisphere. The principal dilemma confronting the White House was whether, and in what circumstances, it should withdraw support from disintegrating allies and throw its influence behind the forces pushing for a return to electoral politics.

Why the United States shifts policy track and starts advocating a transfer of political power to elected civilians after decades-long support for auto-

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cratic or authoritarian Third World allies is one of the central questions addressed by this study.

Historically, the possibility of a regime change leading to the demise of a longstanding Third World client has produced aggressive efforts by Washington to coopt and shape the political transition in a manner that limits losses and maximizes advantages. In these circumstances, two vital inter-related issues have preoccupied American policymakers: the nature of the opposition movement and the survival of the key institutions that define the state structure.

For successive U.S. administrations, what segment of the anti-regime force is dominant, and therefore most likely to direct the process of political and economic change in the event of a transition, has been a critical factor influencing the policy debate. The hegemony of conservative and/or moderate civilian forces implies limited socioeconomic reforms and accommodation with the existing state and class structure; a guerrilla-dominated movement conjures up images of far-reaching shifts in the distribution of political and class power, restructuring of the capitalist economy, and transformation of the state, especially the armed forces and the civil bureaucracy. In other words, Washington differentiates between those groups in nationalist, anti-dictatorial movements likely to pursue programs that do not challenge U.S. permanent interests, including historic linkages with collaborator groups in the economy, state, and society, and those anti-regime elements that, at least potentially, prefigure the shift of a whole geographic territory out of the American sphere of influence. Hence, the consistent pattern in U.S. policy when confronted by these situations: intervention in support of forces pushing for a regime change that have revealed a preparedness to accommodate basic American concerns, and active efforts to eliminate or marginalize the power of forces perceived to have the most radical implications for those concerns in the post-transition period.

In analyzing Third World political systems, Washington recognizes two levels of reality: the strategic and tactical or the state and regime. The state represents the permanent interests of class power and international alignments: the defense of capitalism and ties to Western markets and linkages to the U.S. hegemonic bloc. It is not based on or constructed by transitory public opinion or electoral processes – nor does it usually depend on political parties or personalities. The institutions or components of the state are products of long-term, large-scale processes – the interaction of dominant classes and the interrelation between classes, the permanent civil and military bureaucracy, the judiciary, and those institutions that control the economic levers of the accumulation process. The regime represents the day-to-day policy decisions at the executive military/civilian level that can modify or negotiate the operations of the permanent interests but never challenge

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them without evoking a crisis. Regimes are the elected or self-appointed policymakers, subject to renewal or replacement, operating within the context of the state and class framework. This study targets the state rather than the regime precisely because Washington's permanent (strategic) interests in Third World societies are vested in the composition, collaboration, ideology, and resources (especially coercive power) of the state. In a crisis or period of political upheaval, the regime may be expendable; the state is not.

American foreign policy toward the Third World focuses on the notion of violence as the ultimate arbiter of power and guarantor of basic U.S. interests – political, economic, and strategic. Hence, the composition of, and control over, the armed forces and police is a more basic concern to the White House and State Department than who dominates the executive and legislative branches of government. Of course, U.S. policymakers are aware that hostile regimes can provoke a crisis by challenging the state, even leading to political cleavages within the state, and thus try to support regime changes congruent with the state. The level of Washington's concern over challenges to the state is incomparably greater than over changes in regime. The state/regime distinction is crucial in deciphering why the U.S. opposes Third World "revolution" and on occasion tolerates Third World "reform." Revolutions challenge the state; reforms operate through changes in the regime based on the preexisting state.

American policymakers' preoccupation with the survival of the coercive institutions has manifested itself most strongly in cases where the political challenge to an allied incumbent includes a significant radical nationalist and/or anti-capitalist component. These occasions provide the most graphic illustration of Washington's order of priorities: Ensuring the survival of the state takes precedence over the fate of a longtime friendly client. The possible alternative is not one the White House wishes to contemplate: a restructured armed forces and a new chain of command with no prior allegiances to, or linkages with, its counterparts in the United States. In the event Washington deems the new regime hostile to U.S. permanent interests and pursues a policy of confrontation and destabilization, the absence of a collaborator armed forces is a powerful obstacle, as the Cuban Revolution showed, to the achievement of the fundamental strategic objective.

However, this state/regime distinction is no less relevant to elected civilian governments than to client dictators such as Batista in Cuba or Somoza in Nicaragua. As the cases of Goulart in Brazil and Allende in Chile make abundantly clear, both Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued similar confrontationist policies where changes of regime via the ballot box have not been congruent or "compatible" with the pre-existing state. Where these regimes have attempted to restructure the state

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apparatus and state-class relations as part of a new socioeconomic project, Washington has actively intervened and promoted a period of “instability” and “conflict” between the regime and state – which the latter has invariably won, usually overthrowing the regime, on occasion forcing a modification in its behavior.

The critical factor explaining U.S. shifts in support for a particular Third World regime – its preparedness to jettison a longstanding client ruler – is fundamental opposition to the appearance of democratic mass social movements from below wanting to change the regime and the state. United States support for, and promotion of, changes from military/dictatorial to electoral/civilian regimes is precipitated by fear and hostility toward those movements that manifest anti-regime and anti-state objectives. The policy shift is designed to preempt and divide these movements by coopting the bourgeois civilian opposition and grafting a regime composed primarily of these forces onto the existing state structure. What typically follows this kind of political transition is efforts to divide and demobilize the democratic mass social movement (the perceived threat to U.S. permanent interests) through a combination of clientele relations and repression.

The basic hypothesis of this study is that Washington’s policy toward the Third World has always operated within a state-regime framework, supporting and defending by all means at its disposal client-states while retaining a flexible tactical position regarding regimes. This two-track approach reveals both U.S. rigidity about changes in state structures and flexibility in relation to regime changes. Writers who conflate these essentially different phenomena have been mistaken about the options and choices open to American policymakers. Liberal critics who associate U.S. policy exclusively with dictatorships fail to explain the accommodation to electoral transitions, indeed Washington’s pronounced shift toward a preference for Third World civilian governments since the late 1970s. Likewise, conservative writers who criticize the White House for dumping right-wing military regimes fail to recognize the deeper structural continuities that preoccupy U.S. policymakers – they confuse regime with state.

Nor are explanations of policy shifts toward dictatorial or electoral regimes with reference to bureaucratic infighting (for example, National Security Council vs. State Department), particular parties in power (Democrats are supposedly more disposed to electoral regimes, Republicans to military rulers), or influential policymakers (for example, Kissinger, Brzezinski, Vance) very convincing. American policy operates along multiple tracks to provide maximum flexibility and leverage in confronting rapidly evolving situations. The use of various policy instruments does not indicate a contradictory approach due to bureaucratic or personal rivalries, but must be viewed as

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part of a complementary and coherent strategy within which individual policymakers or agencies predominate at any particular moment depending on the level and scope of the conflict in the target country. Operationally, executive branch foreign policy agencies share a common perspective – a consensus over policy goals. Within this larger framework one finds a combination of overlapping responsibilities and bureaucratic conflicts rooted in functional responsibilities and particular agency interests. In specific instances where Washington has spurred regime changes, the supposedly conflicting executive branch agencies have cooperated and pursued complementary policies. Moreover, both Democratic and Republic administrations have pursued policies promoting cooperation with civilian or military regimes and, at different times, have supported regime changes from electoral to military and vice versa.

In light of the preparedness on the part of U.S. governments to accommodate and support autocratic Third World governments over extended time periods in the absence of challenges to the regime or state (for example, Batista's Cuba, Somoza's Nicaragua, the Shah's Iran, Marcos's Philippines, Pinochet's Chile), an abrupt policy change toward such clients cannot be explained in terms of any White House commitment to promoting or imposing democratic values, but only in relation to permanent interests. U.S. policymakers interpret a change from dictatorship to democratic regime, first and foremost, as a mechanism for preserving the state (the most important safeguard of these interests), not as a mode of promoting democratization and the values that accompany it.*

The transition from a military dictatorship to an elected regime in Chile in December 1989 is particularly instructive in this regard. Having supported the Pinochet armed forces coup that overthrew the democratic socialist government of Salvador Allende in September 1973, and hailed the free-market, export-oriented economic model implemented by the generals, a decade of brutal authoritarian rule did not induce even the Carter administration (which opposed bilateral and multilateral aid to the dictatorship on human rights grounds) to push for a return to civilian rule. However, the reemergence of mass-based social movements offering a direct political challenge to the regime in 1983, and the subsequent radicalization of the forms of struggle and leadership of these movements, eventually forced the Reagan White House to move slowly, but surely, toward advocacy of a regime change based on a negotiated transition that would divide the opposition and preserve the state. The goal was to facilitate the ascendancy

* On occasion, however, values may play a role in defining the kind of actions taken as a result of the perceived need to defend the hegemonic state's permanent interests.

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of the center-right “anti-regime” civilian forces over and against the ascendancy of the “anti-system” movements, while minimizing the changes in the existing socioeconomic model and the state institutions.

The United States conditioned its financial and political support for the conservative-moderate anti-Pinochet groups on their willingness to break ties with the left and participate in an electoral calendar outlined by the dictatorship. Following the July 2–3, 1986 general strike, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Robert Gelbard flew to Chile and bluntly told the renovated Socialists and Christian Democrats that the Reagan administration opposed the tactics of “social mobilization” and alliances with the left. Immediately thereafter, the mass-based opposition movement broke apart, the center-right forces rejecting the strategy of mobilization politics.¹ In turn, Washington agreed to pressure Pinochet to comply with his electoral timetable and accept the outcome. The result was the best possible outcome from the point of view of U.S. permanent interests in Chile: a regime change that disarticulated the social movements challenging strategic state allies, and the legitimation, and (temporary) stabilization, of the Pinochet state and socioeconomic model by the new electoral regime.

Whereas the movements forced the issue of regime change, it was Washington that “brokered” the negotiation process that produced the hybrid political system – a popularly elected regime inserted in military-constructed state institutions. The Reagan-Bush White House sacrificed the Pinochet regime to save the neo-liberal state, and in the process took credit for promoting democracy. But it was a “redemocratization” process organized on the terrain of the authoritarian right. The presidential victory of the conservative Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin was situated within the authoritarian parameters and rules of the game established by the Pinochet military dictatorship.

On the basis of these observations, a number of central propositions can be generated to account for U.S. policy toward political transitions in the Third World:

1. There is an underlying consensus among U.S. policymakers and the corporate elite to defend client-state structures in all circumstances.
2. When state structures are threatened by broad-based social and political movements, Washington will seek to divide these movements, hiving off sectors compatible with the state and U.S. permanent interests and promoting a political settlement in which electoral processes are incorporated within existing state structures.

¹ See James Petras and Fernando Ignacio Leiva, “Chile: The Authoritarian Transition to Electoral Politics,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 99–100.

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3. The policy of dividing the opposition movement involves two approaches: pressure on the incumbent regime to modify its policies and coopt pliable sectors of the opposition; pressure to replace the regime with sectors of the opposition compatible with Washington's permanent interests – in recent times substituting military with electoral/civilian governments in cohabitation with the existing state.
4. The new regime will be embedded within the “old” state structures and join with the United States in demobilizing or repressing those sectors of the opposition movement oriented toward changing the state. Furthermore, the constraints imposed by U.S. policymakers on political and social changes in the post-transition period are defended by evoking a “concern with legitimate issues of national security.” Under that rubric, the White House gains license to intervene and manipulate Third World internal political processes and institutions to accommodate U.S. hegemonic and corporate needs.

Hegemonic states face a particularly difficult task in effecting a political transition in circumstances where the incumbent client regime is tightly connected with the state, all the more so where the client dictator has built up strong political loyalties in the armed forces that resist pressure from the outside. The hegemonic power cannot isolate the regime from the state to sacrifice the former to save the latter. In this instance, the historic ties pass from the hegemonic power to the incumbent dictator, and from the dictator to the military hierarchy of the client state. This underscores the supreme importance of prior horizontal links at the sub-regime level, particularly with the commanding officers of the military, if the hegemonic power is intent on promoting a change of regime in the Third World.

As all of this suggests, Washington policymakers do not always achieve their sought-after objectives. Sometimes a regime change takes place that is deemed unacceptable. A second set of propositions lend themselves to examining under what circumstances this happens and also how the United States responds when the new regime pursues policies contrary to the former's definition of its permanent interests:

1. Regime changes may occur because of imperfect timing. Where the revolutionary process has advanced too far, and the radical forces have already assumed undisputed hegemony, no credible split-off from the opposition movement may be available.
2. Regime changes may occur as a result of non-synchronous perceptions between client regime and patron. Where the client-regime perceives its relations with the hegemonic patron as strategic, it will come into conflict

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with the changing tactical policies of the patron who views the client as expendable. The conflict between the strategic perception of the client and the tactical needs of the patron can lead the former to adopt an intransigent position, refusing to leave office, thus delaying regime change and endangering the state. By tying the stability of the regime to the continuance of the state, the incumbent client may be attempting to reverse the pressure back onto the hegemonic power to force it to shift support back to the client.

3. Where regime changes take place that begin to challenge the permanent interests of the hegemonic power, the latter will exercise its historic ties with collaborator forces in the state and class structure to force the regime to reorient its policies to accommodate the state, or destabilize and overthrow the regime and replace it with one congruent with the state and its hegemonic patron.
4. Where the regime and the state have been transformed in a fashion to challenge the permanent interest of the hegemonic power, the latter will move to reverse the changes through a combination of policies, including the recomposition of the dismantled components of the old state apparatus as a counterrevolutionary army, an economic destabilization program, and the promotion of internal civilian restorationist forces. By attacking the state, economy, and regime simultaneously, the hegemonic power hopes to reconstitute an externally oriented state power linked to a pliable civilian-military regime.
5. Where revolutionary changes in state power preempt and short-circuit the process of reshuffling the regime, the hegemonic power embarks on a program of ideological warfare that focuses on two sets of issues: First, state transformation and the creation of a new revolutionary state structure is described as concentrating power and undermining pluralism. In this context, pluralism is identified with the presence of client groups in positions of influence in the state and hence the continuance of outside hegemonic leverage. Second, the presence of popular militias and mass organizations as centers of political and social power are described as precursors of authoritarianism or totalitarianism – even if elected processes and elected institutions operate. In operational terms, the code words “authoritarianism” or “totalitarianism” refer to popular control over the state within which the electoral regime functions.

Client dictators and elected presidents: U.S. policy and the Latin American state

U.S. policy toward political transitions in postwar Latin America has centered around the goal of securing regime changes that ensure the continuity

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of the state. Every president, from Eisenhower to Reagan, has accorded priority to the task of preserving the state while issues of democracy and dictatorship have remained secondary. The following examples (excluding Nicaragua) illustrate and illuminate this argument. Each case involves either a regime crisis in which Washington's traditional allies were challenged by democratic social movements and where U.S. policymakers sought to dump dictatorial regimes to save the state, or a situation in which the White House intervened on the side of the state against a regime that prefigured a threat to the state, and enforced a political transition to recreate a congruence between regime and state – and thereby eliminate a threat to U.S. permanent interests.

Cuba

Between 1952 and early 1958, the Eisenhower administration's policy of accommodation with the Batista military dictatorship was shaped by two general considerations: the Cuban regime's capitalist development strategy that provided favorable conditions for U.S. investment and trade expansion; and Batista's anti-communism and active support of U.S. regional and global objectives. The initiation of a guerrilla struggle in December 1956 and the increasingly repressive and corrupt policies of the dictatorship provoked a limited debate among mid-level American officials about the possibility of a more formal and correct bilateral relationship. But neither the White House nor the upper reaches of the State Department expressed much interest in Cuban developments, viewing the island basically as a "safe precinct."

In mid-1957, however, extensive interviewing of trade union leaders in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Pinar del Río led the *New York Times* correspondent on the island to conclude that "a majority of the rank and file [workers] are anti-Batista."² The Santiago proletariat was described as being in "open revolt" against the regime.³ Meanwhile, influential segments of the Havana bourgeoisie had begun to defect from the strategy of "civic dialogue" and "compromise" politics. Industrialists whose declining economic position derived from "the intrusion of Batista and his cronies into the private business sector,"⁴ and civic, religious, and professional groups

2 Herbert L. Matthews, "Situation in Cuba Found Worsening; Batista Foes Gain," *New York Times*, June 16, 1957, p. 26.

3 Herbert L. Matthews, "Populace in Revolt in Santiago de Cuba," *New York Times*, June 10, 1957, p. 1.

4 Alfred Padula, Jr., *The Fall of the Bourgeoisie: Cuba, 1959-1961* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1974), p. 101.

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opposed to the manifest brutality and parasitism of the military-controlled state were instrumental in providing a structured urban opposition to Batista and providing material supports for the rurally based social revolutionaries.⁵

By early 1958, the regime's manifest political isolation, growing social polarization, and the appearance of a nationwide opposition movement led by insurrectionary forces had forced Washington to question its viability and its capacity to preserve the state and safeguard basic American interests over the long term. This sense of concern, even panic, was heightened with the collapse of Batista's major military offensive against the guerrillas in June and July of 1958. Eisenhower policymakers began to visualize the possibility of the disintegration of the Cuban armed forces. Officials expressed concern "that the breakdown of the military as an institution would present a threat to commercial interests" and also mean the loss of "a resource for the maintenance of order during a transition period."⁶

Defining this mass social movement as a primary threat, Washington hastily set about devising new strategies under the pressure of limited time constraints that would divide the opposition to the regime and preserve the state. The paramount concern was to deny political (and state) power to the Castro forces. "Nobody in the State Department," said one official, "wanted Castro to get in."⁷ The preferred alternative was a pro-capitalist regime not identified with the excesses of the dictatorship but committed to the survival of a refurbished and reconsolidated Batista military state structure.

The problem of sifting the various strategy options, and settling on an appropriate response, was made more difficult by Batista's intransigent refusal to accommodate repeated U.S. requests for his voluntary resignation in favor of a transitional, anti-Batista, anti-Castro regime. Nevertheless, the State Department pushed ahead in an attempt to forestall a guerrilla victory, oust Batista from power, and impose an interim regime composed of selected anti-Castro civilian and military individuals. In a top secret memorandum to President Eisenhower in October 1958, acting Secretary of State Christian Herter outlined the immediate strategic priorities: "The Department has concluded that any solution in Cuba requires that Batista must relinquish power. . . . The Department clearly does not want to see Castro succeed to the leadership of the Government. . . . Therefore, we have been and are attempting in every appropriate way, through all means available, *without openly violating our non-intervention commitments*, to help create a situation in which a third force could move into the vacuum between Batista

5 Matthews, "Situation in Cuba Found Worsening; Batista Foes Gain," p. 26.

6 Quoted in Morris H. Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution: The United States and Cuba, 1952-1986* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 62.

7 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 63.