# Introduction

Since its founding, the United States has been philosophically dedicated to supporting liberal democracy and the rule of law. This commitment is found in the most important documents and treaties of the nation, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has been proclaimed by presidents, secretaries of state, and other policymakers from the time of George Washington to the present day. In addition, throughout its history the United States has been an expansive nation territorially, economically, and culturally. As a result, the American desire to promote democracy has created a conflict between American values and ideals and American security and material interests.

During the 1920s, in an effort to resolve this dilemma, American leaders developed and institutionalized the logic, rationale, and ideological basis for the United States to support right-wing dictatorships in the name of freedom. As my book *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–1965*, demonstrated, the result was a policy of support for right-wing dictatorships that promised stability, protected American trade and investments, and aligned these dictatorships with Washington against the enemies of the United States.[1] World War II challenged the idea that supporting authoritarian regimes enhanced American interests and led to a temporary abandonment of this policy.[2] The wartime opposition to fascism and the triumph of the Allies made the promotion of democracy a paramount concern as the postwar period promised a vindication of American values and institutions. From these ideas emerged the remarkable achievements in postwar West Germany, Japan, and Italy of establishing democratic governments and the

[1] Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side*.

[2] I use the terms "right-wing dictatorship" and "authoritarian regime" interchangeably throughout the text, just as American policymakers did in their discussions of such regimes. Also following the usage of U.S. officials, both are defined as any antidemocratic regime that is not socialist or communist.

rebuilding of the economies of Western Europe and Japan. Yet the apparent change was not universal as the continued support of certain dictators indicated. American officials now distinguished between a regime such as Hitler's that threatened peace and those, such as Anastasio Somoza García's in Nicaragua, that apparently did not. Thus, policymakers adopted a pragmatic rationale for defending dictatorships they favored, and moral judgments were invoked only when the government opposed a regime rather than to provide a consistent principle to guide policy and base decisions.

With the emergence of the Cold War, expediency again overcame the American commitment to democracy as the United States came to prefer "stable" right-wing regimes in the Third World over indigenous radicalism and what it saw as dangerously unstable democratic governments. The pronouncement of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947 and the adoption of containment as the global policy of the United States brought about the change. President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States faced a global contest between two competing and incompatible ways of life, democracy and totalitarian communism. It was now a bipolar world. In that context, it did not matter that many of the regimes the United States came to support were not democratic, or had overthrown constitutional governments. If it was now a contest between only two ways of life; nations had to fit into one category or the other. Right-wing dictatorships became part of the free world no matter what the composition of their governments, and the United States gained friendly, albeit brutal and corrupt, allies, who backed American policies in the struggle with the Soviet Union.

As the Truman administration created the post–World War II national security state to carry out the global struggle against the Soviet Union, advocates of containment defended their actions by arguing that the United States, because of its position as the leading democratic nation in the world, had an obligation to defend freedom. Reaching back to the republican ideology of the American Revolution, Manifest Destiny, and notions of American exceptionalism, policymakers asserted that it was the duty and destiny of the United States to assume the burden of world leadership in order to defend liberty and the nation against communism, just as it had done in defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. This World War II narrative served to frame all American actions in terms of defending the "free world" against Soviet totalitarianism.[3] As Michael Hogan has demonstrated, in constructing this understanding and pursuing the Cold War, officials in the Truman administration worried about the possible danger of undercutting freedom at home and destroying the values and institutions that the policy of containment was supposed to save.[4]

[3] See Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, and Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny,* for the development of these ideas in the nineteenth century, and Fousek, *To Lead the Free World,* for the creation of what Fousek terms the ideology of "American nationalist globalism" during the Truman administration.

[4] Hogan, *A Cross of Iron*.

There was another contradiction that also had to be confronted, the apparent need to support nondemocratic but anticommunist regimes. Policymakers were aware of the paradox that supporting right-wing dictatorships contradicted the narrative they used to criticize the Soviet Union and carry out a global policy of containment. Yet, because the United States was seen as a unique nation, and its use of power benign and for the benefit of others, it could justify its actions as being necessary aberrations in the long-term defense of freedom. Thus, the Truman administration revived the pre–World War II rationale for supporting right-wing dictatorships. Based upon a paternalistic racism that categorized non–Western European peoples as inferior, vulnerable to radical ideas, and therefore in need of a firm government to maintain order and block communism, authoritarian regimes were viewed as the only way most Third World nations could undergo economic improvements that would allow for the development of more "mature" populations without succumbing to communism or radical nationalism. While this attitude undermined the avowed rectitude of American leaders, democracy was not seen as a viable option for newly independent nations or the countries of Latin America. Strong dictators, therefore, were seen as bulwarks against political instability and channels for modernization. Hence policymakers believed that support for authoritarian regimes protected liberalism internationally by preventing unstable areas from falling prey to Bolshevism while allowing time for nations to develop a middle class and democratic political institutions. Through nation building, dictators would be the instruments of the creation of strong and eventually free societies.

The administration also introduced an important new variable into the basic assumptions of American policy toward right-wing dictatorships. A distinction was now drawn between authoritarian dictators on the right and totalitarian dictators on the left. Autocratic regimes were seen as traditional and natural dictatorships for their societies, while totalitarian regimes were classified as imposed autocratic rule plus state control over the economy. In this understanding of the world, there was little room for moral arguments against right-wing dictators. They would be wedged into the free world, no matter what their record of abuses, as nations capable of being set on the road to democracy. No such hope was held out for communist nations. Moreover, the administration believed that whenever right-wing dictatorships were overturned, the resulting governments were weak and unstable, making those nations susceptible to communist subversion. The United States, it concluded, had to support right-wing dictators in order to provide stability, protect American economic interests, ensure American security, and promote liberalism.

American leaders remained aware of the contradictions in this policy and its shortcomings. For example, President John Kennedy and his advisors worried that right-wing dictators were proving to be ineffective bulwarks against communism and were creating political backlashes against the United States, as was the case in Cuba. Authoritarian rulers upset political stability as much as they ensured it by frustrating their populations' desires for change and democracy, and they nurtured support for left-wing and communist opposition to their

rule. The problem was how to break the dependence on right-wing dictators for maintaining order, how to promote change without losing control of the political situation and unleashing revolutionary movements. The president provided an excellent example of this dilemma in 1961 when discussing the Dominican Republic. "There are three possibilities," Kennedy said, "in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really cannot renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."[5] With the growing crisis in Vietnam and revolutionary challenges in other parts of the world, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations found no answer to this problem and opted to continue to support right-wing dictators as necessary to maintain order in nations that were too politically immature for self-government, to block the spread of communism, and to preserve American access to the resources of the Third World.

After 1965, however, American policy toward right-wing dictators became a contested issue as the Vietnam War served to undercut much of the logic and rationale used to justify both American Cold War policy and support of authoritarian regimes, and brought to the fore the contradictions in American policy. The debates over and changes in American policy toward right-wing dictatorships from the mid-1960s to the end of the Cold War are the subject of this study. While the persistence of older attitudes and approaches continued to guide American policy into the 1970s, the shattering of the Cold War consensus brought forth a sustained criticism of American assistance to various right-wing dictators and an alternative approach under President Jimmy Carter. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan's reassertion of the verities of the Cold War and the logic and rationale that had been used to justify friendships with authoritarian regimes since the 1920s led to tense struggles and efforts to counter Reagan's policies in Central America, South Africa, and the Philippines.

Scholars have examined American support of specific dictatorships, but no comprehensive study of how American policy toward right-wing dictatorships changed in the wake of the Vietnam War exists. *Friendly Tyrants*, edited by Daniel Pipes and Adam Garfinkle, contains twenty-three case studies examining American policy and anticommunist right-wing dictatorships. American backing of these dictators is never questioned. Focusing on periods of upheaval and crisis management, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, the book seeks to discover patterns that "could be put to practical use in managing current troubles and preventing future ones," and to answer the question, "how does one gauge when an authoritarian regime may be susceptible to an overthrow that will damage U.S. interests?"[6] Whether or not instability is endemic to such regimes and relationships is never addressed. A follow-up volume by Garfinkle and coauthors, *The Devil and Uncle Sam*, is designed as a guide for policymakers to use in conducting relations with right-wing dictators. The authors conclude

[5] Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 769.
[6] Pipes and Garfinkle, eds., *Friendly Tyrants*, ix, 4.

that United States policy toward authoritarian regimes "has been reasonably effective in achieving a proper balance of realism and idealism, and that balance has stood us in good stead most of the time."[7] This study challenges the conclusion that American support for right-wing dictatorships has served the nation well.

Since the end of the Cold War, a triumphalist interpretation of American foreign policy has emerged that claims that the United States won the contest with the Soviet Union because of its values and its promotion of liberalism and democracy. Most notably, Tony Smith's *America's Mission* examines U.S. efforts to promote democratic governments throughout the twentieth century and argues that the promotion of democracy was "the central ambition of American foreign policy during the twentieth century." He claims that this policy was the main mechanism the United States used to further and protect American national interests abroad, and that the U.S. victory in the Cold War was attributable to the correctness of this approach and a validation of the superiority of its values: democracy, free enterprise, and liberal internationalism. Smith concludes that President Ronald Reagan's steadfast promotion of democracy abroad meant that "by 1992 democracy stood unchallenged as the only form of mass politics that offered itself as a model worldwide."[8] To make this case, Smith has to ignore much of the history of United States relations with right-wing dictatorships and interventions in the Third World to overthrow governments that the United States has opposed. American support for right-wing dictatorships demonstrates that the promotion of democracy was not a consistent, central goal of the United States, and the history of supporting authoritarian regimes cannot be dismissed or ignored in evaluating American foreign policy since 1965.[9]

This study examines the logic, rationale, and ideological justifications used by American officials for continued U.S. support of right-wing dictatorships, and the challenges that emerged after the Vietnam War that made supporting right-wing dictatorships a contested issue. The central concern is how American officials understood the problem in terms of an overall policy and in relation to specific countries, and how that shaped their decision making about various nations. Here, the more nuanced approaches to containment that détente was based on, and that reflected the reality of the Sino-Soviet split, did not influence policy as anticommunism remained a blanket position for supporting various brutal regimes in the Third World. American officials consciously and purposefully supported authoritarian regimes in the pursuit of American interests, and

[7] Garfinkle et al., *The Devil and Uncle Sam*, 17.

[8] Smith, *America's Mission*, 3–4, 267.

[9] I use the date 1965 as the starting point of this study for two reasons. First, while the analysis of the Congo goes back to the late 1950s to establish the context, and while Lumumba was overthrown in 1960, Mobutu does not come to power and establish his dictatorship until 1965. Second, the first volume of my analysis of United States foreign policy and right-wing dictatorships, *Thank God They're on Our Side*, ended with 1965, and this study picks up the examination chronologically at this point.

often employed covert operations and other undemocratic means to accomplish this end.

Given the large number of dictatorships in the world, the focus of this study is on American policy and the decision making in Washington, and not on bilateral relations. Moreover, as the book covers six different presidencies over three decades, and policies toward nations on five continents, it is not possible to discuss with the same depth local events that more specialized works on U.S. policy toward individual nations or regions provide.[10] Similarly, while covert operations played a large role in United States policy toward many of the nations discussed, and are noted where appropriate, there is no attempt to provide a detailed analysis and description of these activities. The concern of this work is not with the actual role of the CIA in various nations such as Indonesia, Greece, and Chile, but with why the United States supported military dictatorships in these countries. The use of such undemocratic and secretive means, however, does further demonstrate that American policy was not primarily based upon the promotion of democracy abroad.

Throughout the 1960s, support for right-wing dictators continued to shape American policy toward the Third World, with the policy expanded to encompass the newly independent nations of Africa. American officials, employing the too-familiar racial categories that marred foreign policy making, worried that the people of Africa were unprepared for and unable to maintain democratic regimes. Washington, therefore, feared that these new countries would be beset with political instability and upheavals that would threaten Western interests and open the continent up to communist appeals. In response, the United States supported strongmen and military leaders who it believed would impose order while serving to block revolutionary nationalism and communism. Most notably, the United States helped to overthrow the government of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and in 1965 came to support the establishment of the dictatorship of Joseph Mobutu. That same year, the Johnson administration supported the overthrow of Sukarno in Indonesia and the coming to power of Suharto after the bloody massacre of hundreds of thousands of people. Two years later, when the Greek colonels overthrew the democratically elected government in Athens and established a military dictatorship, Washington again rationalized its support as necessary to maintain order, prevent the spread of communism, and protect vital American economic and security interests.

The Vietnam War, however, changed the political climate in the nation and raised new debates and questions concerning American foreign policy. America's longest war and the battles over executive power that emerged at its conclusion provided an opportune time for a reevaluation of the policies that had led to that protracted, painful, and divisive conflict, and brought forth multiple challenges to the policy of containment and support for right-wing dictators. Critics noted that in addition to the immorality of supporting

[10] Interested readers should consult the notes in specific sections and the bibliography for these studies.

authoritarian regimes, the policy, while providing short-term gains and benefits for the United States, created long-term instability and political backlash against the United States in various nations of the world. Right-wing dictators consistently resisted reforms urged upon them by the United States, created politically polarized societies that destroyed the political center, and fostered radical political movements that brought to power the kinds of regimes the United States most opposed and had originally sought to prevent. Moreover, the policy damaged the credibility and reputation of the United States by aligning it with some of the most oppressive and violent governments in the world.

It was the United States' role in General Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile, and President Richard Nixon's support for his regime, that brought forth sustained criticism of American support for right-wing dictators and marked the beginning of change. Rather than acquiesce to the president's actions, Congress moved to investigate the American role in the coup and placed restrictions on American aid and support for the Chilean junta. The establishment of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (the Church Committee) in 1975–76 provided a central focus for investigations into American covert operations, attempts to overthrow foreign governments, assassination efforts, and support for right-wing dictators. For many Americans, these hearings provided convincing evidence that the policy of supporting right-wing dictatorships was both morally flawed and worked against the long-term interests of the United States. The committee chair, Senator Frank Church, spoke for many when he argued during the bicentennial year of 1976 that it was time to once again have American foreign policy conform to the country's historic ideals and the fundamental belief in freedom and popular government. Critics called for the United States to reorient its moral compass and to find methods other than covert activity and support for brutal dictators, such as supporting self-determination and the protection of human rights, to promote American interests in the world. In the process, these hearings broadened the range of legitimate dissent and changed the discourse on American policy toward right-wing dictatorships.

These criticisms paved the way for President Jimmy Carter's efforts to forge a post-Vietnam foreign policy that rejected the central axioms of the Cold War and the containment doctrine, and emphasized human rights. During the Carter years, new voices were heard and approaches made regarding American policy toward right-wing dictators. Carter sought to implement a post–Cold War policy that emphasized supporting American ideals and principles as a more effective means to combat communism and protect the nation's interests in the Third World. The president understood the difficulties and potential problems inherent in shaping and implementing a policy based upon human rights, was aware of the limits of moral suasion, and did not believe that change could occur overnight. Moreover, he realized that he would have to support certain allies despite their despotic rule owing to national security concerns. These realizations opened Carter up to criticism from the left that he was not doing enough, fast enough, to promote human rights and led to charges that the changes he promised were more rhetorical than real. Carter, nonetheless,

stayed with his policy despite its shortcomings as he remained convinced that the old approach was morally bankrupt, had damaged America's position and credibility throughout the world, and needed to be changed. When the regimes of the shah of Iran and Anastasio Somoza collapsed in 1979, Carter saw this as the inevitable result of their authoritarian rule and refused to abandon his policy and intervene to save these two dictators.

Advocates of the old policy of supporting right-wing dictators, however, blamed Carter, rather than the widespread popular discontent in these nations, for the overthrow of these two long-term allies of the United States, and the debate over American policy was renewed. The most vocal and influential critic was a future ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who staunchly defended supporting authoritarian regimes as the best means to preserve American interests in the Third World by resurrecting the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Upon his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan adopted Kirkpatrick's arguments. Once again, American policy was to support right-wing dictators throughout the world in the name of anticommunism, stability, and trade. Under the Reagan Doctrine, the president promised to promote democracy by supporting freedom fighters around the world while protecting American friends in the Third World.

Yet it would be impossible for Reagan to restore the policy of the pre-Vietnam years. In his efforts to support the brutal military regime in El Salvador, the racist apartheid government in South Africa, and the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, Reagan faced significant opposition from both Congress and the American public that forced him to retreat from his efforts to provide unconditional support to authoritarian regimes. When crises emerged in these nations, questions were raised concerning the efficacy and the morality of the policy, and about the wisdom of continued American support for unpopular, corrupt, and brutal leaders. In addition, employing the language of freedom and democracy in support of his renewed Cold War policies left Reagan open to charges of hypocrisy. While there was little that was new in Kirkpatrick's analysis or Reagan's policy, it was rare to have such bold public statements of the ideas and assumptions behind American policy. This openness laid bare the contradictions between the U.S. claims that opposition to the Soviet Union and communist regimes was based on their denial of political rights to their citizens, and Washington's support for governments that were equally undemocratic, guilty of human rights abuses, and denied basic civil liberties to their populations. Critics were able to use the same concepts in their efforts to oppose Reagan's support for right-wing dictatorships, and by his second term the president had to retreat from the Reagan Doctrine. As the policy became a domestic political issue, support for right-wing dictators just because they were anticommunist and promised to support the United States was no longer automatic. The central contradictions and tensions inherent in supporting right-wing dictators in the name of freedom finally made the policy untenable as an overall approach, fundamentally altering a policy that had shaped American diplomacy since the 1920s.

1

# No Acceptable Alternative

## *Mobutu in the Congo*

In April 1965, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams declared that "the Congo, along with Cuba and Vietnam, has been a top U.S. foreign policy headache for 5 years."[1] Yet by 1968 the State Department was able to report that "the Congo has gone off the list of critical foreign policy headaches" and that relations between the United States and the Congo were "excellent."[2] What accounted for this quick turnaround and new state of affairs was the November 1965 coup by General Joseph Mobutu (later Sese Seko Mobutu), and the United States' support for his action and the military dictatorship he established.

That the Congo would be a major problem equal to those of Vietnam and Cuba in the mid-1960s is, at first glance, surprising. Since the end of the slave trade and the European scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had minimal contact with and paid little attention to developments in what most Americans still referred to as the "dark continent." Rather, Washington dealt with sub-Saharan Africa through the colonial powers, supporting their rule and policies. At the end of the 1950s, however, a new challenge faced American foreign policymakers: the decolonization of Africa. After World War II, the rising tide of nationalism abroad, increasing Cold War tensions around the world, the emerging civil rights movement at home, and the granting of independence to African states made it impossible for Washington to continue to follow the lead of the Europeans and allow the colonial powers to dictate American policy. The new problems Washington faced in Africa were manifested in the Congo in the wake of its independence from Belgium in 1960. In the process, the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations all faced the persistent dilemma central to U.S. support of right-wing dictatorships. While American policymakers supported the nationalist aspirations

[1] Williams, "Congo Realities and United States Policy," *Department of State Bulletin*, 24 May 1965, 793.
[2] Administrative History of the Department of State, Vol. 1, Chapter 5: "Congo," Box 2, LBJL.

and quest for independence of the nations of Africa, they were convinced that black Africans were not yet ready for self-rule and worried that "premature independence" would mean unstable governments threatened by communist movements and trying to rule populations that were susceptible to radical ideas. American leaders, therefore, feared that the newly independent states of Africa were vulnerable to communist influence and in need of authoritarian rulers to maintain order, foster economic development, and serve as the conduits for the modernization of their societies.

American foreign policy toward the Third World was fundamentally shaped by the persistent belief that nonwhite people were politically immature and childlike and therefore incapable of self-rule. This led the United States to support pro-Western dictators who would provide stability, support for American Cold War policies, and a favorable atmosphere for American business. Thus, Africa was easily fit into the existing bipolar Cold War framework and policy toward right-wing dictatorships. From the beginning, the United States reacted to the Congo's independence as a crisis. The Congo's size, its geographic position in Central Africa bordering on nine other nations, and its vast mineral wealth made it one of the most important nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Eisenhower, who saw African nationalism as "a torrent overruning everything in its path, including, frequently, the best interests of those concerned,"[3] believed that the government headed by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba was communist-leaning if not communist-dominated and pursued efforts to oust him from power. The removal of Lumumba from office and his assassination, however, did not end the unrest in the Congo. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations, in order to avoid direct American intervention, supported the sending of United Nations and Belgian troops to establish order.

Yet these efforts failed to bring a permanent solution, and rebellions again broke out when the foreign forces were withdrawn in 1964. American leaders continued to fear that unrest in the Congo would lead to a communist triumph throughout Central Africa. With the American commitment to Vietnam escalating, Washington turned to the Congo's military and General Mobutu to provide stability and a bulwark against communism in the largest and wealthiest nation in Central Africa. Mobutu, who had been recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1960 and had ousted Lumumba from power that same year, was seen as the right type of leader for the Congo. He would bring stability, prevent communism from expanding in the region, and allow for continued Western access to the Congo's raw materials. Mobutu's taking of power on 24 November 1965 was seen by American officials as a necessary antidote to the unrest and rebellions that threatened the nation, and he was hailed as the savior of the Congo from chaos and communism. For over thirty years, Mobutu would enjoy Washington's support while he ran the nation as his personal fiefdom, amassed a fortune, and bankrupted and divided the country.

[3] Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 573.