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Russell Crandall

Excerpt

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I

Understanding U.S. Policy

Given that communism is no longer the existential threat it once was, Cold War–era approaches to U.S.–Latin American relations are no longer sufficient. The traditional Big Stick metaphor, though, remains a useful lens through which to examine the motivations and applications of U.S. policy in Latin America that were common before the end of the Cold War. The Big Stick refers to the way the United States wielded its overwhelming power, often through unilateral and domineering policies, to promote outcomes in line with its national security interests. Historically, the United States has dealt with Latin America (Central America and the Caribbean in particular) from a position of superiority, one from which it “told” Latin Americans more than it “asked” them.

Acknowledging the Big Stick’s legacy is not intended to place a value judgment on U.S. actions in Latin America. Nor does this book seek to resolve the debate over the morality or efficacy of U.S. policies during the Cold War or earlier eras. Rather, our point is to characterize the United States’ historical motivations in Latin America, so that, as the post–Cold War era nears the end of its second decade, we may better see why the Big Stick is not the entire story in today’s context. Does the United States continue to determine outcomes in the region more by power and force than by cooperation and respect? How extensive is its power and influence? Is this influence beneficial or detrimental to Latin American interests? If U.S. policy is harmful or counterproductive, what should it look like instead? Before exploring these questions, we first must look back to the nature of U.S. policy during the Cold War, an era that still influences U.S. policies.

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COLD WAR HANGOVER

If one word can describe the underlying issue that drove U.S. policy in Latin America during the Cold War, it is *security*. Successive Cold War-era American administrations – Republican and Democratic alike – developed and implemented their Latin American policies usually in direct reaction to the perceived security threat of communist revolution in the United States’ very own “backyard.” Democratic president John F. Kennedy, for instance, authorized the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, in a failed attempt to spark a popular insurrection to overthrow Cuba’s new Marxist revolutionary leader Fidel Castro. Kennedy’s fateful decision was a response to Castro’s stunning revolution in 1959 and Washington’s fear that the Cuban leader would now attempt to “export” communist revolution to other Latin American countries.

A few years later, fearing that the Dominican Republic was vulnerable to exploitation by radical communist elements, Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Johnson, ordered upward of 20,000 American troops into the Dominican Republic to quell an incipient civil war. In the early 1970s, concerned that Chile was headed toward communism under newly elected President Salvador Allende, Republican president Richard Nixon oversaw covert efforts to undermine the leftist leader’s democratic government. After declaring that the Soviet Union and Castro’s Cuba were attempting to fan communist revolution across the Central American isthmus, Republican president Ronald Reagan spent hundreds of millions of dollars to shore up El Salvador’s government and military. And in Nicaragua, the Reagan administration trained and funded a counterrevolutionary force committed to overthrowing the revolutionary government in Managua.

These episodes of U.S. policies in Latin America illustrate the intensity of the United States’ preoccupation with Latin America during the Cold War. In the early 1960s President John F. Kennedy called Latin America “the most dangerous area in the world.”¹ Two decades later, during the height of controversy over U.S. policies in Central America, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick claimed that Central America and the Caribbean had become “the most important place in the world for us.”² To be sure,

¹ See Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

² Quoted in Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century: U.S.–Latin American Relations since 1889* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 223.

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rhetoric and style varied across administrations, but the overriding goal was the same: stop communism at all costs.

Washington's Cold War policy responses promoted U.S. national security interests over other potential priorities, such as democracy or the United States' image in the region. Defenders of this "security first" emphasis argue that, while it was not always pretty, Washington had to employ a variety of diplomatic and military means in order to defeat communism.

On the other hand, critics of U.S. policy claim that the United States relinquished its moral authority by engaging in activities that were antithetical to the country's democratic foundations and practices. They also argue that these policies were counterproductive, often producing as many enemies as friends in the region.³ Such critics maintain that the Eisenhower administration's covert overthrow of leftist but democratic Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 revealed Washington's willingness to abandon its democratic principles, further exposing the cynical and hypocritical nature of American policy in the region. Moreover, many governments and observers throughout Latin America concluded from Arbenz's overthrow that the United States was concerned not about democracy and sovereignty but about its narrow economic and strategic interests in the region.

Despite the disagreements between these two camps, there is no question that Washington used its enormous military and economic might as a Big Stick to ensure that events in the region concluded favorably for the United States. However, Washington did not rely solely on threats or force to promote its policies in the region; it also encouraged economic development and democracy programs as a means to promote "communist-free" outcomes. The first such policy was President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps programs that began in the early 1960s. The United States also funded civil society groups to help foster peaceful democratic change in countries such as Chile in the late 1980s and Haiti in the early 1990s. In the case of Chile, the avidly anticommunist Reagan administration – in what became a policy that surprised many critics who assumed that Reagan would ignore the Chilean dictator's brutal excesses – funded the democratic opposition's effort to defeat right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet in a 1988 national referendum.

Many observers greeted the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for the United States to adapt its policies in ways that would bolster U.S.–Latin American relations: no longer beholden to the overriding concern of communist expansion, Washington could shift its narrow focus on security

³ See Julia Sweig, *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the American Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

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toward a more expansive and mutually beneficial set of policies.⁴ This approach would see the United States finally focusing on issues often neglected during the Cold War, such as human rights, democracy, and economic reform.⁵ For these observers, the post-Cold War era rekindled a latent “Wilsonian urge” to promote distinctively American notions of democracy and capitalism in the region.⁶

Other observers, however, forecasted a different outcome for the post-Cold War era. Rather than expecting enlightened policies and hemispheric engagement, these observers assumed that the United States would quickly forget Latin America. No longer a global hotspot, they surmised, the region now had to fear becoming an “Atlantis” from the U.S. perspective.⁷ One scholar even argued that Latin America might end up “missing the Cold War” because it at least had kept Washington’s rapt attention during this period.⁸

ESTABLISHMENT AND ANTI-IMPERIALIST SCHOOLS

A useful way to organize the conventional approach to studying U.S.–Latin America relations is to divide the varying perspectives into the Establishment and Anti-imperialist schools. While not entirely comprehensive, these two broad conceptual schools encompass the major ideologies in what is an often polarized and ideological realm of U.S.–Latin America relations.

The Establishment School

The Establishment school, whose adherents are often members of the U.S. foreign policy “establishment,” believes that the United States usually acts

⁴ For more of the optimistic scenario, see Jorge I. Domínguez, ed., *The Future of Inter-American Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5; Jorge G. Castañeda, “The Forgotten Relationship,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May–June 2003): 67–81; Kenneth Maxwell, “Avoiding the Imperial Temptation,” *World Policy Journal* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 57–68; Howard J. Wiarda, “After Miami: The Summit, the Peso Crisis, and the Future of U.S.–Latin American Relations,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 43–69.

⁵ Wiarda, “After Miami,” 43–69.

⁶ Joseph Tulchin and Ralph Espach, “A Call for Strategic Thinking,” in *Latin America in the New International System*, ed. Joseph S. Tulchin and Ralph H. Espach (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 11.

⁷ Castañeda, “The Forgotten Relationship,” 70.

⁸ Michael Desch, “Why Latin America May Miss the Cold War: The United States and the Future of Inter-American Security Relations,” in *International Security and Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Jorge I. Domínguez (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 245–65.

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in good faith in its dealings with Latin America and that Washington's espoused goals of democracy, human rights, and economic liberalization are benign and necessary for the region's stability and growth. The school also believes in the legitimacy and morality of the U.S. government, even if fierce (and often partisan) debates exist within the school as to what should constitute the specific nature of U.S. policies in Latin America.

The Establishment school viewed the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for improved U.S.–Latin American relations. No longer forced to fight communism, these analysts and scholars contended, U.S. policy-makers would take up issues of democracy and economic reform and trade liberalization. Thus, according to one Establishment adherent, “free from the strategic and ideological rigidities of the Cold War, Latin America in the mid-1990s looked forward to a more realistic and constructive relationship with the United States.”⁹ For the Establishment school, the potential exists for a “win-win” scenario in U.S.–Latin American relations.

Perhaps the greatest distinction among the various elements of the Establishment school is how they perceive threats in the region. More conservative Establishment policymakers and analysts are predisposed to see threats to American interests in matters such as drug trafficking, anti-American nationalism, and populist economic policies. For example, conservatives tend to be more alarmist about President Hugo Chávez's attempts at spreading a “Bolivarian Revolution” throughout Latin America and supporting Marxist guerrilla groups in Colombia than, say, about the excesses of a right-wing political leader or government. Conservatives tend to work in or with Republican administrations.¹⁰

The liberal side of the Establishment school is more willing to look at the “root causes” of drug cultivation or of Hugo Chávez's populism; its policy prescriptions tend more toward rewards, or “carrots,” than punitive “sticks.” For example, in describing his view of the motivations behind post-Cold War U.S. policies in the region, Tim Reiser, a senior Democratic staff member for Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), underlined the central tenets of the liberal wing of Establishment school:

Since the Cold War our interests have broadened. Today we are dealing with many challenges including terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime, illegal immigrants, supporting elections and democratic institutions, military, police and

⁹ Castañeda, “The Forgotten Relationship,” 67.

¹⁰ Robert Pastor provides a definition of liberals and conservatives in *Exiting the Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 30–3.

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judicial reform, and issues involving human rights, poverty, health and environmental protection. But these broader interests do not diminish the reality that an overriding interest of the U.S. government in Latin America has been to promote an investment climate where U.S. companies can increase their earnings.¹¹

Although they might have more of a “social orientation” than their conservative counterparts, Establishment liberals do not reject the legitimacy of U.S. leadership and power in the hemisphere. Nor do they consider a secure hemispheric business environment and U.S. investment to be contrary to the interests of Latin American countries. All of the post–Cold War presidential administrations can be placed in the Establishment category; in this sense, U.S. policies most often reflect Establishment principles. The *analysis* of U.S. policy, though, is not limited to the Establishment school.

The Anti-imperialist School

The “Anti-imperialist” school, a set of scholars and policy analysts who adopt a more strident and critical tone toward the United States’ objectives in Latin America after the Cold War, views the United States’ imperialist legacy as the best predictor of how government officials in Washington will act today and in the future. For the Anti-imperialists, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant even fewer restraints on America’s power; thus, the United States could now reign “uncontested and complete.”¹² Therefore, instead of a new era of engagement and “goodwill,” the Anti-imperialists suggested that we should expect Washington to *increase* its control over Latin America.¹³

According to this school, the United States would justify its more controlling policies in Latin America by intentionally replacing communism with a variety of other “threats” to national security, such as drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and terrorism. During the first years of the post–Cold War thaw, for example, some Anti-imperialists criticized U.S. policies as too militaristic. More specifically, they felt that the U.S. military had monopolized bureaucratic control of U.S.–Latin American relations, resulting in policies that were overly “militarized” at the expense of

¹¹ Tim Reiser (Senior Democratic Staff Member, Senate Appropriations Committee), in an interview with the author, Washington, DC, May 3, 2007.

¹² Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

¹³ Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of US Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), xiv.

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diplomatic, political, or social alternatives.¹⁴ In one particularly salient case, they claimed that, instead of helping the Colombian people find alternatives to illicit drug production, Washington instead had sent military hardware and advisers in order to increase its control over the country.

Unlike the Establishment school's view, the Anti-imperialist school sees a "win-lose" situation, in which the United States reaps military and financial benefits while Latin America pays the costs of reduced sovereignty and greater poverty. To get a sense of how the Anti-imperialist school might analyze a particular U.S. policy, consider policy activist Coletta Youngers's view regarding the U.S. military's motives for embracing the drug war in the late 1980s: "The escalation of the U.S. war on drugs coincided with the end of the Cold War and the struggle by U.S. policymakers and Pentagon strategists to develop a rationale for maintaining U.S. military might in the region, and protect the status of the United States as sole superpower."¹⁵ Or take another Anti-imperialist explanation of the Clinton administration's motives for supporting the controversial Plan Colombia initiative in 2000. In this characterization, Washington is once again acting in its predictable and nefarious ways, all at the expense of Colombia's welfare:

Plan Colombia is heavily influenced by Washington's successful reassertion of hegemony in Central America following the so-called "peace accords." Washington's success [in Central America] was based on the use of state terror, mass displacement of population, large-scale and long-term military spending, military advisors, and the offer of a political settlement involving the reincorporation of the guerrilla commanders into politics ... Washington believes it can repeat the "terror for peace" formula of Central America via Plan Colombia in the Andean country.¹⁶

In light of these two differing schools, what then is the true nature of U.S. policy since the Cold War? Now that communism is no longer a threat, has Washington adopted a broader set of policies? Or is the United States using its unprecedented military, political, and economic might to increase its control over a region of the world that has historically been its subordinate?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and, while both the Establishment and the Anti-imperialist schools can at times provide accurate and useful interpretations and predictions, each one is incomplete as an overriding framework for interpreting the motivations and applications of

¹⁴ See, for example, Adam Isacson, "Militarizing Latin America Policy," *Foreign Policy in Focus* 6, no. 21 (May 2001): 1-4.

¹⁵ Coletta Youngers, "Cocaine Madness: Counternarcotics and Militarization in the Andes," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34, no. 3 (2000): 17.

¹⁶ James Petras, "The Geopolitics of Plan Colombia," *Monthly Review* 53, no. 1 (May 2001): 30-48.

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U.S. policy in Latin America since the Cold War. Instead, we should continue to consider the premises of these two schools but not let their assumptions overwhelm a broader, more encompassing approach.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Developing a lasting, comprehensive, yet simple approach for understanding post-Cold War U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere is not an easy task. In addition to recognizing the “structural” features, such as “power asymmetries,” that shape the United States’ actions in Latin America, we must also consider the rapidly shifting political, economic, and social currents within Latin America; domestic concerns; and the ideological makeup of presidential administrations.

Power and Influence

The United States obviously holds enormous power vis-à-vis its Latin American neighbors. Value judgments aside, the United States’ almost unrestricted power gives it a tremendous economic, political, and military advantage. Washington is far more capable of influencing events and policies within the hemisphere than its neighbors are of influencing U.S. policy. For example, take the Clinton administration’s decision in March 1995 to “decertify” Bolivia for what it deemed the country’s inadequate progress in the war on drugs. As one might suspect, this decision was deeply unpopular in the South American nation. Yet Bolivia certainly could not decertify the United States in return, even if a strong majority felt that the nation was being highly hypocritical in its approach to the drug war.

Nevertheless, Washington does not necessarily use its power exclusively to promote its own national interests in Latin America. For example, ten successive presidential administrations have continued a policy aimed at ending Fidel Castro’s rule in Cuba. The United States certainly has the military capacity to conquer the island and to determine an outcome favorable to its national interests. Yet it has not done so for many reasons: concern over the political fallout, fear of disproportionate civilian casualties, and belief that the military operation would serve only to embolden Castro’s supporters, as in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, when the defeat of the CIA-sponsored anti-Castro invasion galvanized Cuban support for Castro’s regime. Even with its tremendous might, the United States faces constraints on the application of its power in the hemisphere.

Another unequal aspect of Washington's foreign policy vis-à-vis Latin America is that the United States has policy *choices*. In contrast with its hemispheric neighbors, the United States can act variably, with greater flexibility than its counterparts. Thus, to return to the Cuba example, Washington could invade the Caribbean island but could also opt just to maintain the decades-long economic embargo. On the other hand, it could opt to normalize its relationship with Havana. Again, however, just because Washington has more options does not ensure that it will adopt the most effective or beneficial policy with respect to its own interests.

Although Washington's power and choices in the hemisphere might be unparalleled, its *influence* varies greatly. Take, for instance, the case of the Grenada invasion in 1983 during the height of the Cold War. The U.S. military occupied this tiny island nation and quickly forced the end of a radical Marxist junta. By exerting its power, the United States transformed the very nature of Grenada's political, social, and economic situation in a matter of days. In what came as a shock to many observers, an overwhelming majority of Grenada's citizens responded positively to the invasion.

Jump forward to 2002, when the U.S. ambassador to Bolivia announced that Washington would consider cutting off development assistance if Bolivians elected a candidate who was soft on the drug war. Contrary to what Washington expected, this warning served to boost the electoral fortunes of the campaign's most radical anti-American candidate, Evo Morales. His strong second-place finish in 2002 was to propel him to eventual victory in 2005. In this case, the United States' power did not translate into influence. In fact, it backfired.

Rhetorical, Operational, and Intentional Policies

Another key element to a new approach for understanding U.S. policies in Latin America requires us to determine to what extent we take "rhetorical" foreign policy aims at face value. Over the past two decades, successive post-Cold War administrations have publicly championed a new era in U.S.–Latin America relations. But pronouncements, of course, are only rhetoric. That is, what governments say about a particular issue might be different from what these same governments want. For example, what are we supposed to make of an assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere who explains that the United States' overriding policy concerns in a certain Latin American country are democracy and the rule of law? Similarly, should we take an American president's claim at face value when he says that his goal is to see a free and prosperous hemisphere? These

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questions remind us that understanding the rhetorical level of policy is but the first step in gaining an accurate understanding of policy.

One useful technique in foreign policy analysis is to separate rhetorical foreign policy from operational and intentional foreign policies. As the terms suggests, rhetorical foreign policy is what a government says publicly; operational policy is the action that the government carries out; and intentional policy is the series of objectives the decision makers are attempting to accomplish. Consider a hypothetical example in which Washington directs funding to a Latin American presidential candidate's campaign. Rhetorically, the administration states that its policy is aimed at promoting democracy and economic prosperity. So, we must ask, are Washington's democracy speeches and programs actually intended to fulfill their namesake and promote democracy? Or are the campaign funding efforts serving an ulterior purpose, such as upholding the claims an American company might have on that country's natural resources? On the operational level, we would look at how the U.S. government was actually carrying out this stated policy of campaign support. For the intentional, we would need to determine what Washington was truly trying to achieve by adopting these very rhetorical and operational policies.

Typically, there is less controversy at the rhetorical and operational levels because both of these policies can be easily monitored. Intentional foreign policy, however, is more open to interpretation and much more difficult to determine. Given the infinite number of interpretations, how can we come to definite conclusions about the United States' *intentions* in its Latin America policies?

The answer is that there will never be full agreement. Nevertheless, we can observe the interplay of rhetorical, operational, and intentional policies and ask whether Washington truly intends to put away the Big Stick in its dealings with its Latin American neighbors. The rhetoric of democracy and cooperation put forth by successive post-Cold War presidents suggests that a new era has arrived, but this alone is not sufficient. We need to examine closely the United States' operational policies and consider its often multilayered intentions before we can begin to make even the most tentative conclusions about the nature of U.S. policy in Latin America.

A New Latin America

Our focus on the changing nature of U.S. policy in Latin America since the end of the Cold War should not overshadow the profound changes that have occurred in Latin America. Unlike the dark periods of authoritarian