

Revolution and Counterrevolution: An analysis of U.S. Policy towards Latin America

By Javier, A. Galván
Santa Ana College

http://ext.sac.edu/faculty_staff/galvan_javier/

Resumen

Entre 1960 y 1990 los Estados Unidos basó su política exterior en “ideología de la Guerra Fría” la cual se auto justificaba en la contención del comunismo en el Hemisferio Occidental. La tesis propuesta en este artículo es que durante este periodo Latinoamérica encausó varias **revoluciones** y los EE.UU. actuó como instigador de **contrarrevolución**. Este trabajo analiza tres movimientos revolucionarios en **Cuba, Brasil, y Chile**. Estos casos representan diferentes métodos que hubo en Latinoamérica donde se buscaba lograr la justicia social. Sin embargo, Washington coordinó un fracasado ataque militar contra Cuba en 1961. Después, apoyó dictaduras brutales en Brasil y Chile. Finalmente, los EE.UU. se avocaron a finales de la década de 1980 a implementar una política **neoliberal** que ha causado serios estragos en las economías Latinoamericanas. Asimismo, el artículo analiza las futuras relaciones entre EE.UU y las naciones estudiadas. Así por ejemplo, se examina el impacto de las recientes elecciones presidenciales en Brasil, Ecuador y Venezuela (que sugieren que estos países necesitan un cambio de política económica y no el *status quo* que es lo que busca Washington para expandir su agenda económica de mercados abiertos en América Latina).

Introduction

To understand U.S.-Latin American relations, it is necessary to consider U.S. global policy, and how it affects the Western Hemisphere from a political and economic perspective. There are several bilateral agreements between the U.S. and individual countries in the area, but only a handful of them have been codified as formal treaties. Instead, throughout the Cold War, the U.S. used disparate policies such as the Monroe Doctrine and the Alliance for Progress to deal with Latin America as a package. For example, the Rio Treaty of 1947, despite the Brazilian name, is not limited to this country, but it was intended to unite Latin America in the effort to minimize the potential influence of the Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere. The United States has dealt with Latin America by advocating freedom and simultaneously supporting brutal dictators (like Pinochet), preaching elections and legitimacy while training and financing conter-revolutionary forces (in Nicaragua), and by organizing indirect military interventions (like the Bay of Pigs in Cuba) in which there were no U.S. troops involved in the actual invasion. While these seem to be inconsistent approaches, the key factor is that, for most of the second half of the 20th Century, American foreign policy was based or justified by Cold War needs and

ideology. In addition, the United States also punished Latin American leaders who were not obedient of U.S. policies. Two examples of such “disobedient” leaders who were initially supported and later faced punitive actions by the U.S. are Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Manuel Noriega in Panama. The U.S. intervened militarily in both countries not to institute democracy but to enforce a policy of obedience.

After World War II, the U.S. viewed the spreading influence of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe as a threat to world power, and it developed a policy for the containment of communism, especially in Europe (NATO) and the Western Hemisphere. The result was that the U.S. used the label of “communist” for many events that were simply labor struggles and attempts for social justice. This policy was buttressed by the creation of the Interamerican Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (better known as the Río Treaty) of 1947, which stated that all states in Panamerica would react collectively to an attack on any of its members. Furthermore, the Organization of American States (OAS) was created in 1948, and it defined Communism as an alien ideology. Communism was declared anti-democratic in nature, and incompatible with American ideals. The Rio treaty was just like another version of the Monroe Doctrine because it expanded the U.S. sphere of influence in Latin America. The creation of these organizations and treaties indicate that the U.S. was in a state of high alert predicting labor and peasant rebellions in the Western Hemisphere.

During the Cold War period, the U.S. used its economic power in the form of loans and grants to support economic development with the intent to carve out a greater sphere of influence in Latin America . The U.S. used them as incentives and bribes to mobilize cooperation against the communist threat.¹ Moreover, the Mann Doctrine became a *de facto* policy to tolerate or even encourage Latin American dictators who respected U.S. economic and strategic interests in the fight against communism. For example, the American support of the 1964 military coup in Brazil set a precedent for other dictatorships in Argentina and Chile. Overall, the U.S. valued stability and anti-communist regimes more than democracy itself in the entire Western Hemisphere.

The thesis of this paper is that during the Cold War period of 1960 to 1990, Latin America experienced numerous revolutions, and the United States acted as the instigator of counterrevolution. To illustrate the argument, this article offers an analysis of three revolutionary movements in Cuba, Brazil, and Chile. These cases represent different approaches and struggles to achieve social justice in Latin America.

The Cuban Revolution as a Historical Landmark

From the 1940s until 1959, the U.S. controlled most of Cuban industries, including the largest sugar mills, the railroads, and transportation services. The American mafia ran Havana as a location for gambling and prostitution. The Cuban Revolutionaries were in search of a more equitable distribution of sources, and opportunities for the rural poor. The United States, however, did not expect an armed revolutionary movement in Cuba because it was the most Americanized country in Latin America.

Fidel Castro took power in 1959, and he immediately took steps to insure the success of the Revolution. His aim was to carry out a complete change in the economic, political, and social systems of Cuba. In order to achieve independence and national sovereignty, he began to get rid of the ruling class. Some left in exile and other Batista's followers were quickly judged and executed. He proceeded to organize a massive land reform package, which included the expropriation of American property. He also instituted a social program to provide equal access to education and health care for all Cubans.

Castro's actions for social justice and sovereignty are illustrated in documentary films based on personal interviews carried out by producer and director Saul Landau. In the film titled *Fidel*, Castro himself stated that "*La revolución es un cambio de estructura social. Es un problema de conciencia.*(The Revolution is a change of social structure. It is a problem of consciousness.)" In another film titled *Fidel and Cuba*, he says, "*Es muy importante destruir el viejo orden social junto con sus leyes, y remplazarlas con otras nuevas* (It is very important to destroy the old social order together with its laws, then replace them with new ones)." These documentaries also reveal that Castro was trying to improve the social conditions in rural Cuba, an area that was usually neglected before the Revolution. In addition, the films show how Fidel wants to be personally involved in projects that bring progress to the country side, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, transportation, and roads.

The United States was surprised and threatened by the actions of the new Cuban government under Fidel Castro. Following the Cold War ideology, it declared that only communist governments would engage in land reform. However, the Cuban Revolution was carried out mostly by people who were simply nationalists and not necessarily communists. Two years later in 1961, the initial American response was for President Eisenhower to break diplomatic relations. The next step would be to plan an attack on Cuba. After his presidential election, John F. Kennedy inherited the problems surrounding the Bay of Pigs operation, but he went ahead with it anyways.

The Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 was a dismal failure. The United States coordinated the efforts of a counterrevolution by training Cuban exiles using Guatemala as a training camp and the starting point for a military operation. The main objective was to overthrow Castro. One of the key reasons for the failed operation was that the U.S. withdrew its air power from the mission. For the United States, the Bay of Pigs represented its first military failure in Latin America. Fidel Castro had won the fight, but he now felt threatened by the American determination to undermine his government. So, in 1961, he declared the revolution to be socialist. In a bipolar international system, his aim was to seek the protection of the USSR.

The embarrassment caused by the Bay of Pigs invasion created a U.S. foreign policy with a harder stand toward Communism in Cuba, Latin America, and the entire Third World. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 offered definite confirmation that the threat of armed movements was possible in Latin America. As a result, U.S. policy towards the continent changed to the motto of "not another Cuba." An effort to avoid another revolution in Latin America led to the creation of the Alliance for Progress. While the program was intended to provide assistance for schools and roads, another

program ran parallel to the Alliance with a hidden agenda to strengthen the Latin American military and police to counterattack insurgency movements. To provide additional support, the School of the Americas (SOA) was established to train military and anti-guerrilla groups in Latin America.

During the 1960s, American antagonism towards Cuba intensified, and the next strategy was to isolate it from the world. In 1962, the U.S. implemented an embargo on trade and travel with the island. After the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Johnson administration continued with the mission of sanitizing the Western Hemisphere of communism but with less emphasis on counterinsurgency tactics. Nevertheless, the U.S. continued to find ways to carry out covert operations to undermine Fidel Castro. So, under U.S. pressure, the OAS agreed to kick Cuba out of the organization in 1964. The U.S. also used economic and diplomatic pressure so that other Latin American countries would not trade with Cuba. Over all, Fidel Castro continues to be the most defiant political figure in Latin America and the most disobedient leader of American policy.

U.S. Supports a Brutal Dictatorship in Brazil

Meantime in South America, Janio Quadros was elected as president of Brazil in 1960, and he dramatically changed the course of the U.S.- Brazilian relations. He expressed support for Fidel Castro and refused John F. Kennedy's request to participate in the process to isolate Cuba. He even relaxed his government's views towards Communism. Quadros' actions appear antagonistic towards the United States; however, Brazil's immediate need was not the Cold War but domestic industrialization. Since the U.S. was not helping, Brazil had to look elsewhere. The American neglect of Brazil contributed to its decision to look for other economic markets and trade partners. To follow such needs, Quadros sent his Vice President, João Goulart, to negotiate trade agreements with the USSR and China. As a result of this trip, Brazil ended up selling coffee to the Soviet Union and sugar to China. While in Asia, Goulart found out that the Brazilian president had resigned.

In 1961, João Goulart became president of Brazil. He advocated a massive land reform, and he was openly more leftist than Quadros. However, he also tried to get financial assistance from the United States. As a result, Robert Kennedy visited Brazil in December of 1962 and met with President Goulart. Following their meeting, Kennedy stated "No loans will be offered from the U.S. when there are people in authority in Brazil who follow a communist line."² Soon after in 1963, the Brazilian economy collapsed, and Goulart moved even more towards the left in an attempt to retain power. Consequently, he alienated both the upper and middle classes of Brazil. Moreover, the Brazilian armed forces had the support of property owners, bankers, and the U.S. State Department.³

On March 31 of 1964, the Brazilian military forced Goulart out of office and into exile. Within 15 minutes of the coup, the new Brazilian regime received a telegram from President Lyndon Johnson supporting the change in government. The military appointed Castelo Branco to act as President, but it was an institutional coup d'état since it represented a collective decision for the military to take over the government and not just the actions of a single military individual. The armed forces aimed to remain in power until they could stabilize the nation. In 1964, the armed forces took

action based on their view of politicians as being basically corrupt. However, this group of generals envisioned a temporary military rule to establish order and then reinstate a civilian democratic system in roughly eighteen months.

The rule of Castelo Branco became a period of oppression where terror, torture, and violation of civil rights were a common occurrence. However, this dictator reversed Brazil's foreign policy because he wanted a special relationship with the United States, and he recognized the U.S. as the world leader against Communism. President Johnson's support was consistent with the Mann Doctrine approach of accepting dictators in Latin America as long as they cooperated with the economic and strategic interest of the U.S. in the fight against the communist threat. Following this renewed relationship, the Brazilian Ambassador to the U.S., Juracy Magalhães, even stated "What is good for the United States is good for Brazil."⁴ The result was an increase in American aid and investment in Brazil, which returned the favor by breaking diplomatic relations with Cuba and sending support troops to the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

In 1967, Costa e Silva, yet another general, became president of Brazil based on military support and not by popular elections. He received domestic criticism for being too friendly towards the U.S., especially because, by the 1970s, Brazilian exports to the U.S. were dramatically reduced from 50% to only 20% of its total production. Consequently, Brazil's need for economic development drove its search for new trading partners such as the Soviet Bloc. During the 1970s, Brazil did not really want to be involved in the politics of the Cold War anymore. For example, it refused Carter's request to join the boycott of the Olympics in the Soviet Union.

The documentary *Brazil: Report on Torture* directed by Saul Landau provides tangible evidence of the oppressive military regime, which used torture and intimidation to terrorize its population, especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film offers a series of personal interviews with victims of institutionalized torture. It is a film about the heroic acts of young Brazilians who accepted torture and death as part of their revolutionary spirit. They defied the Death Squads that attempted to get information from them so they could then terrorize even more of its civilian population. During these two decades, the U.S. continued to preach the advantages of democracy. Yet, it seems ironic that, during this period of a brutal authoritarian regime, the United States provided more military and police aid to Brazil than to any other country in Latin America.

At the end of the 1970s, the world was becoming more aware of the brutality of the Brazilian regime. As a result, the military recognized its failure to govern properly and reluctantly accepted a return to civilian rule. The period between 1978 and 1985 is known in Brazil as the "*Abertura*" (opening) of the political system when the military regime aimed for a gradual return of democracy to Brazil. Throughout these years, known as the *Nova Republica*, the common diplomatic principle was to maintain friendly relations with the United States. However, in 1979, Brazil also declared that Latin America was the priority of its foreign policy. In 1985, a civilian government was restored in Brazil when Tancredo Neves became president via civilian democratic elections. This event roughly coincides with the 1984 reelection of Ronald Reagan in the United States. However, Neves died one day before taking office, and Vice President José Sarney took his place. When Sarney took over,

Brazil faced massive labor strikes demanding better jobs and an end to the rampant inflation. According to Ronaldo Munck, Brazil had at this point, the world's largest foreign debt, the highest inflation in Brazil's history, and a massive social crisis.⁵ This time, the U.S. provided financial and political support if Brazil was willing to embrace free market economics.

From Democratic Socialism to Military Regime in Chile

Doctor Salvador Allende was democratically elected as the president of Chile in 1970. He was the socialist candidate, but he won as part of a coalition of socialist and radical communist parties. Despite the fact that Allende had lost two previous presidential campaigns, he believed that there was no need for a military struggle to take power. Instead, he favored the democratic route, and he was elected president when he ran as the candidate of the *Acción Popular*.

Fidel Castro and Salvador Allende are often compared, mostly due to their mutual quest for social justice. When Allende was elected in 1970, he renewed diplomatic relations with Cuba. Both leaders were certainly friends, but they had different styles. While Castro prefers armed struggle, Allende was more of a constitutionalist. Moreover, Allende ran the executive office, but he had no control over the legislative or judicial branches of government. One of Allende's immediate goals was to institute civil order and social reforms. He openly opposed military control of the nation, declared his intent to follow the rule of law, and detailed a massive agrarian reform as part of his economic and political plan. The American reaction was not positive, and the United States set out to destabilize Allende's government.

President Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and CIA Director Richard Helms believed that once the communists took power in Chile, they would never leave office, much like Fidel Castro in Cuba. So, the U.S. organized strikes to shut down crucial sectors of Chile's economy (truck drivers, doctors, miners, etc.). It also flooded the international market with copper, so that Chile's copper industry would suffer financial losses. The U.S. also used its influence to block Chile's access to international lines of credit. There was even an elaborate plan to assassinate Fidel Castro during his visit to Santiago in 1972. Finally, the United States supported a military coup to depose Salvador Allende from power.

On September 11 of 1973, Chile's armed forces attacked the presidential Palace of La Moneda in Santiago. What followed was seventeen years of a military dictatorship under general Augusto Pinochet. The new regime destroyed the judicial institutions and dismissed the existing national congress. The population lived in a state of terror since thousands of people simply disappeared in Chile. Thousands of people were arrested and incarcerated in a soccer stadium. Most of Allende's cabinet members were sent to a detention camp located in an island in southern Chile even though there were no official charges filed against them, including Orlando Letelier, the former Secretary of Defense under President Allende.

The new repressive regime cracked down on the dissidents both at home and abroad. Within the country, the Department of National Intelligence (DINA) was the secret police that targeted the members of the communist and socialist parties as well as the Christian Democrats. The people arrested were sent to concentration

camps, were often tortured, or simply went missing. An important program of repression in South America was labeled as Operation Condor, which operated in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay. Its main purpose was to monitor each other's dissidents. However, the government had many more problems controlling the "external front."⁶

Controlling Chile's image abroad was a difficult task. When the media reported the brutality of the military regime, several countries responded by pulling their ambassadors from this South American nation. However, Henry Kissinger's visit to Santiago in 1976 improved the standing of Chile to the international community. Moreover, it provided a level of legitimacy that was achieved by an open display of support for the military regime of Augusto Pinochet. Despite the American support, other groups of resistance were forming abroad, especially in Holland.

When Orlando Letelier (Allende's Secretary of Defense) was released from prison in 1975, he went to work at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington D.C. and became a political figure of the exile resistance who denounced the injustices of Chile's regime. His reports influenced the cancellation of several investment plans that Dutch companies were considering in Chile. Letelier later used the Netherlands to support an economic boycott of Pinochet's administration. As a consequence for his activism, Letelier became a target of the Chilean secret police.

On September 21, 1976 a car bomb exploded in Letelier's car while driving on Embassy Row in Washington D.C. The Operation Condor had struck in the capital city of the United States. While a trial was held, the publicity of the procedures was more damaging to Chile's reputation than a few guilty verdicts for a handful of responsible individuals. Despite the fact that Pinochet carried out a terrorist attack within the United States, the Carter administration did not take any punitive action against Pinochet's government.⁷

Concluding Remarks

As the U.S. continued with Reagan's approach of "rolling back communism" in Nicaragua and Grenada during the 1980s, it also advocated neoliberal models of economics in Latin America. With the fall of the USSR, the threat of communism no longer existed. So, the United States switched approaches to obtain economic control of Latin American markets. The basic pillars of neoliberalism are the reduction of state control and a complete reliance on the open market. In practice, it means the privatization of state owned enterprises and cuts on social spending. By letting the market "work," it opens domestic enterprises to foreign investment and the promotion of exports. Projects like land reform and subsidized social programs are discouraged because they interfere with the free operation of the market. The constant aim of U.S. policy was to help American large corporations to grasp commercial opportunities and to create bigger overseas markets with U.S. private capital.⁸ The combination of political expectations and free market economics has created different set of circumstances for Cuba, Brazil, and Chile. Consequently, predictions for the future of U.S.- Latin American relations cannot be applied to all three countries as a package.

For example, a handful of scholars, politicians, and policy makers have speculated about a post-Castro scenario in Cuba. They agree that he could not be easily replaced, simply because there is no other leader that possesses his political

experience and popular charisma. However, scholars suggest that a post-Fidel government would be centralized in nature. Max Azicri argues that Cuba is in a path of transition and reform that simultaneously adjusts to international realities and domestic expectations.⁹ He is even optimistic that Havana will eventually normalize its diplomatic relations with Washington. Following a similar approach, Michael H. Erisman suggests that change in Cuba will not depend on a single event (like the death of Fidel Castro), but it will be a gradual political and social transition.¹⁰ Such transition is not likely to happen in a hurry.

In Brazil, the recent election of Luis Ignacio Lula de Silva in 2002 has generated tremendous optimism. He was the candidate for the left-wing *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or Worker's Party (PT). During his campaign, he declared his concern for the welfare of the general working population and his aim to fight against the social and economic inequalities in Brazil. In addition, he initially advocated that Brazil defaulted in paying its foreign debt to be able to finance the social program he proposed. On the topic of economic policy, he denounced the U.S. proposals for the Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (FTAA) as amounting to a *de facto* U.S. annexation of Latin America.¹¹ Consequently, Lula is not likely to be such an easy partner to the U.S. as former President Fernando H. Cardoso, who was a strong supporter of free market economics. The U.S. wants stability in the Western Hemisphere, but Lula's democratic election in Brazil reveals that what Latin America wants is change, as seen with the recent elections of leftist presidents in Venezuela, Brazil and Ecuador.

Despite popular support, Lula also faces incredible domestic obstacles. Right before he took over the presidency, the *real* currency was depreciated due to the financial crisis in nearby Argentina, and it also lost an additional 40 percent of its value right before the 2002 election. The Brazilian frustration grew because this was a country that was doing everything by the book according to the guidelines provided by the IMF; it had a floating exchange rate and a conservative fiscal surplus.¹² The situation led to the largest financial bailout provided by the IMF in the amount of 30 billion dollars. As a result, Brazil must now cut government spending, export more, and have a minimum 2% surplus in its annual budget. These requirements are likely to restrict Lula's operations to implement his social programs.

Currently, Chile is often portrayed as a model for other nations to follow along the lines of successful market economics policies. This South American nation has diversified its economy, and it is not dependent on only one market (like Mexico is on the NAFTA agreement with the U.S. and Canada). Instead, Chile has obtained a "partner" status on the MERCOSUR economic block in the Southern Cone. It is also scheduled to become an "associate" country to the NAFTA agreement in North America. In addition, Chile has trade agreements with Asia. These options provide Chile with a balanced portfolio that appears to also be buttressed with political stability that encourages foreign investment.

In the future, Latin America will likely continue to have a relationship of political frustration and economic tension with the United States. In the meantime, the United States will focus its geopolitical efforts in other more profitable parts of the globe (like Europe, Asia, and the Middle East), which will result in further neglect of its relationships with Latin America.

NOTES

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2. Joseph Smith. *A History of Brazil: Politics, Economy, Society, and Diplomacy*. (London: Longman Publishers, 2002), p. 194.
3. Robert M. Levine. *The History of Brazil*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 125.
4. Joseph A. Smith. *History of Brazil: Politics, Economy, Society, and Diplomacy*, (London: Longman Publishers, 2002), p. 233.
5. Ronaldo Munck. *Latin America: The Transition to Democracy*. (London: Zed Books, 1989), p.136.
6. John Dinges and Saul Landau. *Assassination on Embassy Row*. New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p.167.
7. I did, p. 397.
8. Gerald K. Haines. "Has Anything Changed? The United States and its Relations with Latin America." *Diplomatic History*. Fall 1993, Vol.17 Issue 4, p. 629.
9. Azicri, Max. *Cuba Today And Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 307.
10. Michael Erisman, p. 152.
11. John Williamson. "Lula's Brazil." *Foreign Affairs*. January/February 2003. Vol. 82 Issue 1, p.107.
12. Ibid, p. 105.

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¹ Mark T. Gilderhus. "An Emerging Synthesis? U.S.-Latin American Relations since the Second World War," *Diplomatic History*. Summer 1992, Volume 16 Number 3, p. 436.

² Joseph Smith. *A History of Brazil: Politics, Economy, Society, and Diplomacy*. (London: Longman Publishers, 2002), p. 194.

³ Robert M. Levine. *The History of Brazil*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 125.

⁴ Joseph A. Smith. *History of Brazil: Politics, Economy, Society, and Diplomacy*, (London: Longman Publishers, 2002), p. 233.

⁵ Ronaldo Munck. *Latin America: The Transition to Democracy*. (London: Zed Books, 1989), p.136.

⁶ John Dinges and Saul Landau. *Assassination on Embassy Row*. New York: Pantheon Press, 1980), p.167.

⁷ Idid, p. 397.

⁸ Gerald K. Haines. "Has Anything Changed? The United States and its Relations with Latin America." *Diplomatic History*. Fall 1993, Vol.17 Issue 4, p. 629.

⁹ Azicri, Max. *Cuba Today And Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 307.

¹⁰ Michael Erisman, p. 152.

¹¹ John Williamson. "Lula's Brazil." *Foreign Affairs*. January/February 2003. Vol. 82 Issue 1, p.107.

¹² Ibid, p. 105.