



U.S.-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath

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Abstract

Was the Cold War a distinctive moment for U.S.-Latin American relations? The answer can be no. The United States had faced military, political, and economic competition for influence in the Americas from extracontinental powers both before and during the Cold War. The United States pursued ideological objectives in its policy toward Latin America before, during, and after the Cold War. And the pattern of U.S. defense of its economic interests was not appreciably different during the Cold War than before. And yet, this article argues that the Cold War was a distinctive moment because ideological considerations acquired primacy over U.S. policy in the region to an extent unparalleled in the history of inter-American relations. As a consequence, this ideologically-driven U.S. policy often exhibited nonlogical characteristics because the instruments chosen to implement U.S. policy were too costly, disproportionate, or inappropriate. The article focuses on those instances when the United States used military force to achieve its aims or when the United States promoted or orchestrated an attempt to overthrow a Latin American government.

Was the Cold War a distinctive moment for U.S.-Latin American relations? In many respects, the answer is no. The United States had faced military, political, and economic competition for influence in the Americas from extracontinental powers before the Cold War, just as it did during the Cold War. The United States had pursued ideological objectives in its policy toward Latin America before, during, and after the Cold War. And the pattern of U.S. defense of its economic interests in Latin America was not

appreciably different during the Cold War than at previous times. From these singular perspectives, it is difficult to assert that the Cold War was a significantly distinctive period of U.S.-Latin American relations; it looked like “more of the same.” This essay begins by examining these three propositions.

Nonetheless, the Cold War emerges as significantly distinctive in U.S. relations with Latin America because ideological considerations acquired a primacy over U.S. policy in the region that they had lacked at earlier moments. From the late 1940s until about 1960, ideology was just one of the important factors in the design of U.S. policy toward Latin America. The victory and consolidation of the Cuban revolutionary government changed that. In its subsequent conduct of the key aspects of its policy toward Latin America, the U.S. government often behaved as if it were under the spell of ideological demons.

Moreover, from the mid-1960s to the end of the Cold War in Europe, this ideologically-driven U.S. policy often exhibited nonlogical characteristics. I will argue that U.S. policy was illogical when at least one of two closely related criteria were met: 1) the instruments chosen to implement U.S. policy were extremely costly and certainly disproportionate to the goals that were sought; or 2) the instruments chosen to implement U.S. policy were markedly inappropriate to reach the goals that were sought. These two criteria were often associated with stunning failures of accurate diagnosis of the nature of a problem. 1 (To say that a policy is instrumentally rational need not require that it be applauded, of course; such rationality establishes common grounds for civil disagreement over policy.) 2

To focus on the most important cases, this essay concentrates on those instances when the United States promoted or orchestrated an attempt to overthrow a Latin American government or when the United States used military force to achieve its aims. Force is the most potent instrument any state can employ, and the overthrow of other governments is the most intrusive policy one state can pursue against another short of annexation. The President of the United States adopted these decisions to use force; thus at these times the U.S. government was more likely to behave as a “unified actor.”

I will argue that the United States deployed military force or otherwise sought to overthrow a Latin American government whenever it felt ideologically threatened by the prospects of communism in a Latin American country, and only then. In contrast, the United States did not engage in such actions, even when other Latin American governments acted in ways seriously adverse to U.S. interests, if there was no ideological odor of communism. That is, the active engagement of the Soviet Union in particular cases, or the expropriation of the property of U.S. citizens and firms, did not by themselves trigger a U.S. use of force if the Latin American government that was acting contrary to U.S. preferences signalled credibly that it harbored no hint of association with communism.

The primacy of ideology as the shaping factor in U.S. relations with Latin America vastly increased the likelihood of U.S. military intervention in Latin America even though U.S. goals could have been achieved by other means at much lower cost. Ideological politics led often, consequently, to illogical U.S. actions. This is what made the Cold War distinctive in the Americas.

Explaining the Cold War in the Americas: I

Superpower Competition?

The U.S.-Soviet competition was the central feature of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union were the only major powers capable of exerting influence everywhere throughout the world as each sought to “balance” the other. The predominant scholarly approach for the analysis of competition between major powers has been “neorealism.” Three fundamental neorealist assumptions have been: 1) that the most important actors in world politics are territorially organized entities called states; 2) that the behavior of states is substantively and instrumentally rational; and 3) that states seek power, and calculate their interests in terms of power, relative to the nature of the international system that they face, which is marked by the absence of effective centralized international authority, i.e. inter-state anarchy. ³

Neorealists understand the Cold War everywhere, and certainly in the Americas, as a function of U.S.-Soviet competition.

The most rigorous effort to apply neorealism to U.S.-Latin American relations has been developed by Michael Desch, although he found it necessary to modify several neorealist propositions. Desch argues that the United States had a strategic interest in Latin America only in order to “prevent an adversary from presenting a wartime, military threat to its ability to defend itself or defend intrinsically valuable areas of the world” (Desch 1993, 137). Under those circumstances, Latin America had considerable “extrinsic” value to the United States, to employ Desch’s terminology; otherwise, Latin America mattered little to the United States.

That analysis implies that the Cold War was not an analytically significant departure in U.S.-Latin American relations. U.S. strategic interests and concerns were not significantly different when the United States faced the Soviet Union, imperial Germany, or Nazi Germany. Indeed, Desch analyzes detailed case studies of each of these instances. Secondly, neorealists understand U.S. strategic interests as focused on Mexico and the Caribbean islands: the physically bordering countries and the sealanes. Neorealism cannot explain either U.S. preoccupation with Argentina’s domestic policies under Juan Perón at and after the end of World War II nor the U.S. anti-communist crusade in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1980s: “These expansive policies,” seeking to influence the internal political structures of these small countries, “turned out to be not only impractical but also counterproductive,” Desch (1993, 140) tells us.

Neorealist scholarship leaves us with several insights. International competition between the United States and a major extra-hemispheric power precedes the Cold War. U.S. concern—and the U.S. use of military force—with the territory of its neighbors and near-neighbors can be understood as an attempt to keep such major powers from exercising power in the Americas. That was as true of the Roosevelt Corollary at the beginning of the twentieth century as of the U.S. intervention in Grenada in 1983. As a preeminent U.S. scholar of U.S. interventions in the first fifth of the twentieth century, Dana Munro, put it: “What the United States was trying to do [through its military interventions]... was to put an end to conditions that... [posed] a potential danger to the security of the United States” (Munro 1964, 531). The Cold War as such adds no analytically significant explanation to this form of U.S. behavior. Neorealism sheds light also on another point: For the most part, the United States did not deploy its military force in South America. Neorealism is a parsimonious and effective guide, therefore, both to the areas of long-standing U.S. concern and to the relative U.S. abstention from the use of force in South America.

And yet, neorealism leaves us with a puzzle. There is too much unexplained U.S. behavior. It does not suffice to note that U.S. policies toward Perón in the mid-1940s or toward Central America in the 1980s may have been misguided and counterproductive. They did occur and, consequently, neorealism is also an insufficient scholarly guide to U.S. relations with the region.

Moreover, both standard neorealism and Desch's partially modified version leave us with a strong prediction: the end of U.S. competition with an extra-hemispheric power is likely to lead to a significant decline in U.S. attention to Latin America, presumably including a decline in the practice of U.S. military intervention (Desch 1993, 149; Desch 1998). But as the Cold War was barely ending in Europe, the United States invaded Panama militarily to overthrow its government. In 1994, the United States invaded Haiti militarily toward a similar end. And after the Cold War ended in Europe, the United States signed on to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and promoted a hemispheric free trade agreement—a form of economic behavior neorealists might understand more readily while the U.S. faced an adversarial superpower than when it did not.

In short, neorealism explains well important aspects of continuity in U.S. foreign policy but it leaves unexplained—for the distant past, the present, and the Cold War periods—what it must consider cases of anomalous U.S. behavior.

Ideological Contest?

The Cold War was also an ideological struggle, not just a contest between superpower “billiard balls.” U.S. presidents were committed to combat communism, not just the Soviet Union. To that end, some were prepared to “pay any price, bear any burden.” Others were convinced that the United States faced nothing less than an “evil empire.” During the Cold War, most U.S. elites and much of the public believed profoundly in the righteousness of their cause and deeply feared and loathed what they understood as communism. This ideology explains U.S. military intervention, direct and indirect, and other belligerent U.S. actions during the Cold War.

And yet, the Cold War did not give birth to the significance of ideological themes either in U.S. foreign policy generally or in U.S. relations with Latin America specifically. The U.S. Declaration of Independence bristles with ideology, and U.S. policy has embodied explicit ideological themes since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine. This doctrine is often presented as a statement in the tradition of Realpolitik—the first comprehensive statement by a U.S. President consistent with neorealist expectations: the Monroe Doctrine sought to deter European reconquest in the Americas (European powers could retain the colonies they still held). And yet, that reading is a half-truth. The key sentence of President James Monroe's Message to Congress (December 2, 1823) features an ideological policy:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.⁴

It was not just their power but also *their system*, which was “essentially different,” that Monroe sought to keep away. Monroe's ideological intent was instantly understood by Austrian chancellor Klemens von Metternich. The United States, he wrote to his Russian counterpart, had “distinctly and clearly announced their intention to set not only power against power, but, to express it more exactly, altar against altar.”⁵

The main impediment to the U.S. pursuit of ideological objectives in the nineteenth century was its relative military weakness. The United States could defeat Mexico but it could not project its power much beyond. By the late nineteenth century, the United States was ready to fight European powers for the first time since 1812. On 11 April 1898, President William McKinley explained his justification for declaring war on Spain and for intervening in Cuba:

First. In the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there, and which the parties to the conflict are either unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate. It is no answer to say this is all in another country... and is therefore none of our business. It is especially our duty, for it is right at our door... 6

Of course, McKinley had other reasons for the declaration of war but this first reason was no mere fig-leaf. Many U.S. citizens joined him in the belief that the United States had this humanitarian *duty*. (This first clause is also an eerie forecast about a possible future in U.S.-Cuban relations.) From the outset, U.S. imperialism was clothed as a moral crusade. The ideological concerns of U.S. foreign policy reached a climax during Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Sustained and systematic intervention in the internal affairs of Mexico, Central American, and Caribbean states marked this epoch of U.S.-Latin American relations.

Thus it was noteworthy when President Bill Clinton's National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, proclaimed that the Clinton administration considered itself an example of pragmatic Wilsonianism committed to a policy of "enlargement" of the areas of democracy worldwide (White House 1995). These ideological motivations explain, in part, the U.S. military intervention in Haiti in 1994 and some aspects of U.S. policy toward Cuba in the 1990s; recall the names of the key legislation: the "Cuban Democracy Act" of 1993 and the "Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act" of 1996.

Ideology explains the neorealists' anomalies, namely, U.S. intervention in cases where no competing superpower credibly threatened it. For nearly two centuries the U.S. government has claimed a right to exclude certain "systems" from the Americas, and during the twentieth century it claimed to know which system ought to prevail throughout the hemisphere. The Cold War was thus not very different from periods that preceded it. Before, during, and after the Cold War, ideological considerations have been front and center in U.S. policy toward Latin America, even if other considerations have mattered as well. (Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy stands as a brief interlude in an otherwise sustained U.S. commitment to intervene in the domestic affairs of its neighbors.) Neorealist and ideological perspectives agree on one point: the Cold War was but one episode in a long and continuous U.S. policy toward Latin America.

A difficulty with an ideological explanation, however, is that its very timelessness makes it difficult to understand why the U.S. ideological demons are activated and mobilized at particular times. What renders them salient at some times more than at others? U.S. policy toward Latin America, in practice, was not particularly ideological before 1898 and, until the Cold War, ideology was the predominant factor in U.S. policy toward the region only during Woodrow Wilson's first term. We shall return to these issues.

The Defense of Capitalist Rules?

The first successful U.S. overthrow of a Latin American government during the Cold War occurred in Guatemala in 1954. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated the process that brought down the constitutional government of President Jacobo Arbenz. One reason for intervention was the perceived need to protect the United Fruit Co. from expropriation. The next U.S. attempt to overthrow a Latin American government occurred in Cuba; although this one did not succeed, nonetheless U.S. policy was once again motivated, in part, by the commitment to protect the interests of many U.S. citizens and firms from wholesale expropriation.

Tempting though it may seem to understand U.S. policy during the Cold War as an effort to make the Americas safe for capitalism, the historical record does not support it. U.S. military interventions in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and in Grenada in 1983 cannot be understood with reference to the protection of U.S. economic interests. Nor did the United States seek to overthrow every government that did expropriate U.S. firms. For example, a military government seized power in Peru in 1968. Over the next several years, it would expropriate many U.S. firms. Instead of overthrowing this government—a government that also purchased a military arsenal from the Soviet Union—the United States patiently negotiated a mutually satisfactory settlement.

Nor does this record with regard to the defense of capitalist interests distinguish well the Cold War years from those that preceded it or those that followed it. True enough, many U.S. interventions in the domestic affairs of its neighbors and near-neighbors in the early twentieth century resemble the Guatemala 1954 case; U.S. economic interests were threatened, and the U.S. intervened, among other reasons, to protect them. But the United States dealt with Mexico's expropriation of foreign-owned petroleum firms in 1938 in ways that foreshadowed its dealings thirty years later with the Peruvian military government: after some delay and much diplomatic conflict, a mutually satisfactory settlement was reached. Since the end of the Cold War in Europe, moreover, the U.S. military interventions in Panama in 1989 and in Haiti in 1994 seem unrelated to the defense of economic interests.

A perspective focused on the U.S. defense of the interests of private U.S. firms concurs with the neorealist and ideological analyses on one point: U.S. policy toward Latin America during the Cold War is not markedly different from U.S. policy toward the region before or after the Cold War. Both the neorealist and the ideological approaches shed some light on important aspects of U.S. policy toward Latin America but the relationship between U.S. policies to overthrow Latin American governments, on the one hand, and the motivation to protect economic interests, on the other, is weak.

Explaining the Cold War in the Americas: II

The Cold War was a distinctive period in the history of U.S. relations with Latin America for two general and somewhat contradictory reasons. First, the Cold War was the one period in the history of U.S. policy toward Latin America when ideology was repeatedly more important than balance-of-power or economic considerations; at no other moment in that history did ideological considerations so dominate U.S. policy across many presidents from different political parties. Ideology was so overpowering that U.S. policy toward Latin America exhibited marked nonlogical characteristics.

Second, the Cold War was the only moment in the history of U.S. relations with Latin America when a country in this region became a military and political ally of the chief adversary of the United States. Cuba and its foreign policy shaped (and mis-shaped) much of U.S. policy toward the region. Because Cuba was a real adversary, the U.S. government had rational reasons to seek to counter Cuban (and Soviet) influence. Thus there is a tension between these two distinctive features of the Cold War in the Americas. The illogic of U.S. policy would become evident only when the U.S. response to the "Cuban threat" went well beyond a reasonable cost-benefit calculation concerning means and ends or when inappropriate means were employed systematically.

The "Normal" Logic of U.S. Policies toward Latin America

During the first half of the twentieth century the key U.S. policies toward Latin America can be understood as rational responses to the opportunities and dangers present in an anarchic international system. The United States acted to 1) gain territory and influence; 2) exclude rival powers; and 3) protect and advance the material economic interests of its citizens and firms.

The United States went to war against Spain in 1898 to seize territory; although the humanitarian intervention to stop the carnage during the Cuban war of independence was no doubt an important consideration, it was not the U.S. government's principal concern. The United States seized Panama from Colombia in order to build the canal. Imperialism was, above all, about dominion.

U.S. interventions, military and otherwise, throughout much of the Caribbean and Central America in the early years of the twentieth century can be logically understood. At long last capable of enforcing the Monroe Doctrine, the United States sought to keep European powers out of the Americas. The United States intervened to preempt rivals from doing so. The background to the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was a genuine fear of the prospects of European military deployments in the American Mediterranean. In 1902-03, British, German, and Italian gunboats were deployed off the coasts of Venezuela. They sank three Venezuelan gunboats, blockaded the mouth of the Orinoco river, and bombarded Puerto Cabello. During World War I, Germany systematically though unsuccessfully sought to establish a naval base in the Caribbean, and an alliance with Mexico that culminated in German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann's formal offer to Mexico of a military alliance to reconquer the lost northern territories. Once European military threats eased after World War I, U.S. interventions in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America were gradually liquidated, paving the way for the Good Neighbor policy.

These U.S. interventions, and especially the years known as "dollar diplomacy," were also motivated in part by a desire to promote and defend U.S. economic interests. In many cases, the U.S. government took the lead in luring U.S. firms to invest in Latin American countries. The Good Neighbor policy also sought to foster U.S. economic interests in the region while, at the political level, it constructed a hemispheric alliance against the Axis powers during World War II.

The only instance when ideology overwhelmed other factors was President Woodrow Wilson's decision in 1914 to authorize a military intervention in Mexico at the Port of Veracruz. Neither balance-of-power nor economic considerations explain that outcome. Wilson's policies helped to bring down General Victoriano Huerta's government, the Mexican leader most favorably disposed toward U.S. investors during the decade of the revolution. The decision to use military force to help shape Mexico's domestic circumstances reveals nonlogical features: those means could not have reached the hoped-for goal, while the U.S. military action was wholly disproportionate to Mexican provocations (Quirk 1962). Even Woodrow Wilson came to terms with the Mexican revolutionary government as the United States prepared to enter World War I; ideology and the chase of Pancho Villa were sacrificed in 1917 in order not to drive Mexico into a war alliance with imperial Germany.

During the Cold War, U.S. actions against Fidel Castro's government in Cuba were motivated by the Cuban-Soviet alliance and by Cuba's expropriation of U.S. economic interests. Arguably, some U.S. policies in 1959 and 1960 made a difficult situation worse but the Cuban revolutionary government's decisions in international and domestic affairs stemmed from its own volition. ⁷ Fidel Castro was not pushed into the arms of the Soviet Union; he took the lead. ⁸ U.S. policies to prevent or reverse Soviet military deployments to Cuba, Cuban military deployments to other countries, Cuban military and

financial support of revolutionary movements elsewhere, and Cuban actions against the property of U.S. citizens and firms can be readily justified rationally even if one may differ with specific policies. Most U.S. policies toward Cuba were not disproportionate; U.S. coercive measures were also appropriate given the nature of Cuban government actions. In time, the U.S. government also behaved rationally when it curtailed its trade embargo policies (in 1975) so as not to impinge on third countries and when it reached bilateral agreements with Cuba over migration and air piracy, among others. (U.S. government-sponsored terrorism against Cuba in the 1960s was counterproductive and, by my lights, both illogical and immoral, however.)

In response to Cuban support for insurgencies in various Latin American countries, other aspects of U.S. policy were also rational and cost-effective: there was a plausible relationship between the means used and the ends pursued. For example, the United States supported Venezuela's demand for collective inter-American sanctions on Cuba in retaliation for Cuban support for insurgent forces in Venezuela and the landing of Cuban military personnel in Venezuela. Such actions enlisted Latin American support for what was already U.S. policy toward Cuba. Similarly, U.S. counterinsurgency training, finance, and equipment for the Bolivian military to defeat Ernesto (Che) Guevara's expedition to Bolivia was also cost-effective; with modest U.S. effort and expenditure, this policy contributed significantly to the failure of Cuba's policy to support revolutions in South America.

In short, most U.S. policies toward Latin America related to the use of force before the Cold War and some such U.S. policies during the Cold War were quite logical. They reflect the rational behavior of a major power in an anarchic international system seeking territory, influence, the exclusion of its rivals from its zones of influence, and the protection of the economic interests of its citizens.

The Persistent Illogic of U.S. Policy toward Latin America

Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union, and its capacity to survive a no-holds-barred U.S. effort to bring down Fidel Castro's government, traumatized U.S. policy toward Latin America, however. The United States came to exaggerate systematically the nature of the threat to its interests and began to incur costs well beyond what rational calculations of the relationship between ends and means would suggest.

In some cases, just an ideological whiff of communism triggered U.S. actions that were premature, excessive, or very costly. In many instances of U.S. over-reaction, the Soviet Union was either wholly uninvolved or only marginally so. Also in many instances there was either no threat to U.S. economic interests and no means of advancing them, or there were clearly less costly ways to protect U.S. economic interests well short of military intervention or other efforts to bring down a Latin American government.

During the Cold War and before the Cuban revolution, there was already one case of the dominance of ideology in U.S. policy: the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz's government in Guatemala. U.S. actions to overthrow the Arbenz government were motivated principally by the interest in preventing any government in the Americas from developing an entente with the Soviet Union and by concern for United Fruit's interests. The means chosen to overthrow Arbenz were cost-effective: no U.S. troops were employed and little CIA money was spent. On the other hand, Guatemalan relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern European communist countries were incipient at best, and in part understood as Guatemala's defensive response to U.S. hostility. The Guatemalan communist party was weak. The United States greatly exaggerated the import of Soviet-Guatemalan relations though it did not exaggerate the threat to United Fruit; on the other hand, the United States made no serious attempt to pursue

negotiations as an alternative to the use of force. Anticomunist ideological concerns no doubt were the key motivating factor. U.S. means were disproportionate and inappropriate for the goals at stake.

The significance of the ideological factor in the Guatemalan case is clearer through a comparison to nearly coterminous events in Bolivia. The 1952 Bolivian revolution expropriated the tin mines, the largest of which was incorporated in the United States and had important U.S. investors. The U.S. government accepted a negotiated settlement to compensate for the expropriation of the tin mines; over the course of a decade, the companies received approximately one-third of what they claimed was their due (Krasner 1978, 282-285).

The United States had no fear of communism in the Bolivian case and was, therefore, capable of advancing its interests quite rationally. The principal difference to the very same Eisenhower administration between the Guatemalan and Bolivian cases was the ideological “threat of communism” in Guatemala and its absence in Bolivia. Absent such ideological fear, the United States and Guatemala might have reached a comparable property settlement.

On 28 April 1965, the United States intervened militarily in the Dominican Republic, eventually deploying twenty-three thousand U.S. soldiers ashore. They were the first combat-ready U.S. forces to enter a Latin American country in almost forty years. As Abraham Lowenthal (1972, 153) well put it: “The U.S. government’s preoccupation with avoiding a ‘second Cuba’ had structured the way American officials looked at the Dominican Republic throughout the early 1960s.” Although accidents and other motivations were an important part of this story, above all President Lyndon Johnson and his closest advisers believed that a “second Cuba” was simply unacceptable. It turned out that there was no “second Cuba” in the making. The Soviet Union was wholly uninvolved and Cuba was involved only trivially. There was no threat to U.S. economic interests which, in any event, were not sizable. The U.S. response was illogical: the United States deployed massive force to ward off a threat that did not exist.

On 4 September 1970, Salvador Allende won a plurality of the votes in Chile’s presidential elections. His Popular Unity coalition was led by the Socialist and Communist parties. Eleven days later President Richard Nixon instructed CIA Director Richard Helms to “leave no stone unturned... to block Allende’s confirmation” as President. ⁹ The CIA instigated a coup to block the constitutional process. Thus the United States attempted to subvert Chilean democracy out of the ideological fear that an Allende government might become a second Cuba, too.

During the nearly three years of Allende’s presidency, the United States deployed a broad panoply of overt and covert policies against it. ¹⁰ It was reasonable for the United States to oppose the uncompensated Chilean expropriation of U.S. firms but these expropriations did not require Allende’s overthrow. Rather, a settlement could have been reached through negotiations, as a settlement would be reached in the nearly coterminous case of Peru (see below). Allende’s foreign policy had strong pragmatic elements. ¹¹ It was reasonable to expect that Allende’s government would settle the two most contentious expropriation cases (copper and telephone) in part because it already had been negotiating many more compensation cases than the Peruvian government had at the same time (Blasier 1985, 258-270).

Nor did the United States have reason for fearing Soviet-Chilean relations. The Soviet Union dealt with Allende’s Chile within the same broad framework for its relations with other Latin American governments that did not become the object of such U.S. policies (Blasier 1987, 38-41). The Soviet

Union did not subsidize Chilean imports or exports, did not provide free military equipment, did not absorb huge bilateral trade deficits, and did not become an important factor in Chilean international economic relations— all in contrast to Soviet policies toward Cuba. The nature of the Soviet-Chilean relationship could hardly justify U.S. policies toward Allende's Chile. The intense U.S. opposition to Allende's election and government derived principally from ideological fears; the means chosen to address those fears were disproportionate and inappropriate.

As with the comparison between Guatemala and Bolivia in the early 1950s, so too the ideological character of U.S. policy toward Chile can be better understood by examining a parallel case where a Latin American government gave comparable provocation to the U.S. government, but the very same Nixon administration chose the path of negotiation, not overthrow. The Peruvian government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado had much more extensive military relations with the Soviet Union than Allende's Chile ever did. In 1972, Peru purchased 250 T-55 tanks from the Soviet Union and, in the years that followed, it would go on to purchase supersonic fighter bombers, helicopters, and more tanks. Hundreds of Soviet military trainers were deployed to Peru. In the mid-1970s, Peru accounted for one-fifth of Latin America's total arms imports; about half of Peru's military imports came from the USSR (Berríos 1989). Peru also expropriated a large number of U.S. firms during the first half of the 1970s; Peru's hardline stance against compensation for the International Petroleum Company was as tough as the Allende government's position with regard to the copper and telephone sectors. As noted above, by the time of Allende's overthrow in 1973, Peru had negotiated fewer compensation agreements than had Chile (in part because the Peruvian government had expropriated fewer U.S. firms than Chile had). On the objective merits of these cases, Peru posed a greater threat to U.S. interests. And yet, the Peruvian military government, albeit radical in a number of its social and economic policies, never smelled communist. The U.S. government did not fear the Peruvian government ideologically and it was, therefore, quite ready to bargain with it. In 1974, the United States and Peru reached a satisfactory comprehensive settlement of the expropriation disputes, while the United States chose to tolerate the Soviet-Peruvian military relationship. Absent the ideological demons, U.S. policy toward Chile might have been the same.

Ronald Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua in the 1980s underscored again the centrality of ideology for U.S. policy toward the region. President Reagan's closest advisers were willing to break the law to supply weapons to the Nicaraguan Resistance (better known as the *contras*) despite the explicit prohibition of such actions by the U.S. Congress (Tower Commission 1987). In putting the President at risk of impeachment, they revealed how important they thought Central America was for U.S. policy.

Reagan himself devoted perhaps more time and gave more speeches on Nicaragua than on any other single issue of foreign policy during his second term. The President escalated his rhetorical commitment to the cause of overthrowing Nicaragua's Sandinista government. In April 1983, Reagan addressed a special joint session of Congress to defend his Central American policy: "If Central America were to fall, what would be the consequences for our position in Asia, Europe, and for alliances such as NATO? If the United States cannot respond to a threat near our own borders, why should Europeans or Asians believe that we are seriously concerned about threats to them?" In Lars Schoultz's apt phrase, this rhetoric was the "ultimate simplification"— the results of transforming an ideological faith into the test of credibility for the United States worldwide. ¹² And in his 1985 State of the Union address, President Reagan argued that support for "freedom fighters," such as the *contras*, was "self-defense" required to enable Nicaraguans to "defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth."

Days later, Reagan defined his policy more briefly. His support for the contras would stop when the Sandinistas “say uncle.” [13](#)

Nicaragua’s Sandinista government expropriated property belonging to the Somoza family and its associates, and also some property belonging to wealthy Nicaraguans. There was, however, relatively little U.S. direct foreign investment in Nicaragua and most of it remained unaffected by expropriation policies. The U.S. government had two reasons for concern about Sandinista policies. The first was Nicaragua’s relations with the Soviet Union. The second was Nicaragua’s support for revolutionaries in El Salvador.

The Soviet Union and other Eastern European governments delivered significant military assistance to the Sandinista government, including tanks, armed transport vehicles, rocket launchers, and armed helicopters. On the other hand, the Soviet Union did not offer security guarantees or a military alliance to Nicaragua. The Soviets did not supply weapons that could have been readily used for offensive purposes beyond Nicaragua’s borders, such as MiG fighter aircraft; many of the tanks supplied were quite heavy, useful to intimidate opponents but not readily maneuverable in Central America’s rugged tropical terrain. The Soviets and the East Europeans also supplied significant financing for Nicaraguan international economic transactions.

Nicaragua and Cuba helped the Salvadoran revolutionaries. They provided safe havens where those revolutionaries could rest, recover from wounds, and train. They permitted the revolutionaries to store large caches of weapons. Certainly in 1980-81, both Nicaragua and Cuba supplied significant military assistance to the Salvadoran revolutionaries (Blasier 1987, 144-153). Cuba would continue to supply material assistance to the Salvadoran insurgency until 1991 (*Granma* 1991, 8).

It was rational for the United States, therefore, to support the government of El Salvador politically, economically, and militarily to defend itself. It was rational for the United States to act coercively toward Nicaragua to prevent its international aggression and to increase the cost to the Soviet Union of continuing with its military alliance. [14](#) But it would have been much more cost-effective for the United States to have pursued simultaneously a strategy of serious negotiation to achieve those same ends. Such a strategy was readily available. It would have addressed all major U.S. concerns but it would have left the Sandinista government in power in Nicaragua— an outcome that the Reagan administration was simply unprepared to accept ideologically.

Instead, the Reagan administration systematically opposed and undercut the various attempts at negotiations, either under the auspices of the so-called Contadora Initiative (organized by Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela) or under the later Arias Plan or Esquipulas Plan (inspired by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and organized by the Central American Presidents). The Reagan administration also opposed negotiations within El Salvador to settle the internal war (Carothers 1991, 86-92). The ideologically driven U.S. policies prolonged the wars in Central America and increased their cost to the people of the region and to the United States. U.S. policy was illogical.

Peace came to Nicaragua and El Salvador only with the end of the Cold War in Europe. The Bush administration, ably led by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, negotiated directly with the Nicaraguan government in 1989 (paving the way for the 1990 elections that the Sandinistas lost) and subsequently played a decisive role in facilitating the internal negotiations within El Salvador. The Bush administration was prepared to accept a Sandinista government in

Nicaragua or a government of the left in El Salvador if they were to win the elections—the outcome the Reagan administration always rejected ideologically. But this highly rational and successful outcome belongs to the post-Cold War period.

The 1983 U.S. intervention in Grenada exemplifies U.S. ideologically driven policies as well. The New Jewel Movement (in power between 1979 and 1983) did not threaten U.S. economic interests. On the contrary, Grenada's economic growth depended on promoting tourism from the United States. To that end, Grenada had contracted with Cuba for the construction of an airport. The Reagan administration portrayed that airport as a serious strategic menace even though its configuration was what would be expected from its ostensible purposes (after the U.S. invasion, the United States completed the airport).

The New Jewel Movement was, indeed, a communist party. It sought close relations with the Soviet Union and Cuba. It received military and financial support from both, although that support was modest. Grenada lacked naval or air forces to project military power. It had not intervened in the domestic politics of neighboring countries; it had correct state-to-state relations with its neighbors. After the U.S. invasion of Grenada in October 1983, U.S. troops captured important Grenadan documents that demonstrated the extremely limited support that the Soviets were given Grenada. At the time of the U.S. invasion, there were 784 Cubans working in Grenada; of these, 636 were construction workers (Domínguez 1989, 162-171).

The U.S. intervention in Grenada was, therefore, a costly, massive deployment of U.S. force to kill a threat that existed only in ideological terms. The U.S. government saw red in Grenada, and it charged ahead.

Implications for the Post-Cold War Period

There are at least three legacies from the Cold War years for the period since the end of the Cold War in Europe. They are the habituation of U.S. policy to rely on force and coercion; the transformation (but not disappearance) of ideological policies; and the policy toward Cuba.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s, U.S. combat troops did not enter a Latin American country to occupy its territory or overthrow its government. As part of its ideological crusade against communism in the Americas, however, the United States deployed its own troops to the Dominican Republic and Grenada and waged a sustained war on Sandinista Nicaragua. U.S. forces were deployed throughout the region in counter-insurgency operations. Each of these operations was a military success. And at the end of each episode of the use of military force, the Latin American government was friendlier toward the United States. This was true in counter-insurgency operations in the 1960s, in the invasions of Grenada and the Dominican Republic, and in the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. More expansively, the invasions of the Dominican Republic and Grenada would be credited with establishing the bases for enduring democratic rule in each country. (In fact, the Dominican Republic's democratic experience owes much more to events well after, and apart from, the U.S. invasion; the U.S. invasion restored power to those closer to the country's authoritarian past. The argument that the U.S. invasion contributed to democracy in Grenada is stronger because the invasion destroyed the New Jewel Movement's military power. In neither case, however, was the establishment of democracy a reason for the respective invasions.) As a result, U.S. officials acquired the habit of thinking that military force was an appropriate

instrument for frequent use in the region.

Since the end of the Cold War in Europe, the United States militarized those aspects of its policy toward drug-trafficking that dealt with drug interception in source countries. The main resistance to such militarization came from U.S. military officials. U.S. government civilians, however, embraced the use of military instruments much more readily (Council on Foreign Relations 1997).

In December 1989, President Bush ordered a military invasion of Panama to overthrow its government, accused of participating in drug trafficking. The restoration of democracy to Panama was also cited as a goal of the U.S. invasion. In the years that followed, not much progress was made toward ending Panama's role in international drug money-laundering—the main role Panama had long had in this international trade. However, the U.S. destruction of the Panamanian military did make a direct and powerful contribution to setting a sounder basis for democracy in Panama.

In September 1994 President Clinton ordered the U.S. military to occupy Haiti and overthrow its government. The U.S. government sought to create more manageable circumstances to cope with the flow of undocumented Haitians to the United States; having established a constitutional government in Haiti, the United States could then refuse to accept refugees or asylees from Haiti. Nonetheless, the establishment of constitutional government in Haiti was itself an important goal of the U.S. military action.

In each of these two cases, a plausible counter-factual case can be made that more cost-effective means might have been employed. In the case of Panama, the United States lost patience with multilateral efforts and with bilateral negotiations that had a reasonable chance of success in inducing General Manuel Noriega's departure from power. In the case of Haiti, the Clinton administration in 1993 had achieved a negotiated solution to the crisis; only the White House's own ineptitude sabotaged the settlement and required, in the end, the massive military deployment one year later.

These counter-factuals are somewhat less persuasive, however, than those mentioned earlier for the Cold War years. A negotiated solution in Panama in 1989 or in the early 1990s would not have destroyed the Panamanian Defense Force. And yet the destruction of this military force is almost certainly an essential basis for constructing democracy in Panama in the 1990s and beyond. Similarly, a negotiated solution in Haiti in 1993 would not have weakened the military power structure as much as did the 1994 invasion; the extended international police and military presence in Haiti following the 1994 invasion were necessary to give constitutional government a chance. Thus, troubling as the habituation to the use of force may be, a stronger case can be made for the period since the end of the Cold War in Europe than for the years of the Cold War: in the 1990s, at long last, the use of military force turned out to be *appropriate* in important respects to the achievement of the ideological goal of fostering democracy—a goal that was part of the explicit rationale for the invasion—even if the use of such considerable military force could probably have been avoided to reach other reasonable U.S. objectives.

These reflections suggest, in turn, both the persistence and the transformation of U.S. ideological objectives in its relations with Latin America. The United States has come to value the defense and promotion of democracy as a significant foreign policy objective. This transformation began already during the Cold War in the U.S. Congress and during the Carter presidency. It acquired broad bipartisan support only when the Reagan administration endorsed the promotion of democracy as a key objective during its second term (Carothers 1991).

Beyond the invasions of Panama and Haiti, the United States has invested considerable effort and substantial diplomatic resources to defend democratic institutions in Peru, Guatemala, and Paraguay either to mitigate the effects of a coup (the Peruvian case) or to prevent the coup altogether in the two other instances. In each of these cases the United States has chosen to act in concert with other Latin American governments, often though not exclusively through the Organization of American States. The Clinton administration also sought the U.N. Security Council's prior authorization to its military occupation of Haiti—the first time ever that a U.S. government requested prior multilateral endorsement for its use of military force in the Americas (Vaky and Muñoz 1993; Valenzuela 1997).

If these trends persist, then the Monroe Doctrine would be transformed into a multilateral instrument though, interestingly, not repealed. The key difference is that, as the twentieth century ends, nearly all the countries of the Americas believe in their collective right to intervene in the domestic affairs of any of their own where democracy is threatened.

The third legacy of the Cold War is the persisting conflict between Cuba and the United States—the reason why this essay has insisted that the phrase “end of the Cold War” always be modified by “in Europe.” The objectives of a rational U.S. policy toward Cuba have been reached, and the United States could declare victory. The Soviet-Cuban alliance has ended and the new Russian Federation has withdrawn its troops from Cuba and suspended all subsidies to Cuba. Cuba has repatriated all its troops from Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and smaller missions from other countries. Cuba has terminated its military assistance to revolutionary movements. And its government has changed policy to welcome direct foreign investment.

Instead, the U.S. government in the 1990s— unthreatened by any other power or by the Cuban government itself— embarked on a crusade to overthrow the Cuban government. It did so through legislation (the Cuban Democracy Act, most closely associated with then U.S. Rep. Robert Torricelli, and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, better known as the Helms-Burton Act) to impose U.S. policies on its main allies and trading partners, flouting international trade practices and its own past opposition to secondary trade boycotts. The new policies assisted the much-weakened Castro government to rally nationalist support. These new U.S. policies were costly to U.S. foreign policy generally and counterproductive for the new U.S. goals of democratizing Cuba. In the last act of the Cold War, the United States at long last adopted illogical policies toward Cuba.

Conclusions

U.S. relations with Latin America during the Cold War exhibited important continuities with preceding U.S. policies. The Cold War years proved distinctive, however, because anticommunist ideological objectives overwhelmed other U.S. foreign policy goals toward Latin America in each and every case when the United States chose to deploy its military forces or chose to overthrow a Latin American government through some other means. (The only exception was the assassination of the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961.)

The most likely reason for this behavior is found in the politics of decision making. From the perspective of a policy maker, the price for failing to stop a defeat is much higher than the price for over-reacting and incurring higher costs. ¹⁵ The price for failing to stop a defeat is paid by the policy maker; the price for

incurring higher costs is paid “just” by taxpayers and soldiers. Thus arguments about proportionate means and costs apply principally to the foreign policy of the United States as a state, but much less so to the actions of individual foreign policy makers.

Absent the ideological fear of communism, the United States did not deploy its military forces nor seek to overthrow Latin American governments that expropriated a great many U.S. firms (as had revolutionary Bolivia, and Peru under General Velasco). The difference between Bolivia and Guatemala and Peru and Chile was not expropriation but the whiff of communism in Guatemala and Chile; otherwise the offending behavior was quite similar. Absent the ideological fear of communism, the United States did not seek to topple General Velasco’s government in Peru even though it developed the closest military relationship with the Soviet Union that any Latin American government other than Cuba had attempted to that date. The United States had greater reason to be alarmed by Velasco’s Peru than by Allende’s Chile, but the latter, and only the latter, raised the ideological fear of communism. Present the fear of communism, the United States invaded the Dominican Republic even though there was no threat to U.S. economic interests and no Soviet or Cuban involvement, and it sought to overthrow Chile’s constitutional order even before Salvador Allende had a chance to do anything.

A specter haunted the United States. It was the specter of communism anywhere in the Americas. Every U.S. President during the Cold War fervently believed in that opening boast from *The Communist Manifesto* as if Marx and Engels had had the Guatemalan highlands and the Chilean lake region in mind when they wrote it. That ideological fever was more dangerous than the behavior of the rival superpower, more frightening than property expropriation. Peru’s many expropriations and its relations with the USSR, and Bolivia’s expropriation of the tin mines, could be tolerated so long as their governments knew, as Metternich had forewarned, before which altar they should kneel.

So powerful was the Cold War that its legacies of militarization and ideology endure, even if the latter is being transformed in the 1990s in constructive ways. The Cold War’s ideological demons are making their own last stand in the new U.S. government zealotry toward Cuba. Could the following text be used to justify U.S. military intervention in Cuba in the years ahead?

The present condition of affairs in Cuba is a constant menace to our peace and entails upon this Government an enormous expense... [Given] the expeditions of filibustering that we are powerless to prevent altogether, and the irritating questions and entanglements thus arising— all these and others that I need not mention, with the resulting strained relations, are a constant menace to our peace and compel us to keep on a semi war footing with a nation with which we are at peace.

President William McKinley
11 April 1898 [16](#)

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Endnotes

- Note 1:** These ideas first occurred to me years ago upon reading Krasner (1978). [Back](#).
- Note 2:** My approach does not question the rationality or worth of the "grand" values or goals of U.S. policy over time. Were one to question such values and goals, then the case for the illogic of much of U.S. policy becomes stronger. [Back](#).
- Note 3:** The preeminent neorealist scholar has been Kenneth Waltz (1979). For discussion, see also Grieco (1995, 27), and Keohane (1983, 507). [Back](#).
- Note 4:** Quoted in Perkins (1963, 56-57). [Back](#).
- Note 5:** Quoted in Perkins (1963, 392). [Back](#).
- Note 6:** Text in Richardson (1898, 10: 139 and ff.). [Back](#).
- Note 7:** For a thoughtful examination of alternative hypotheses, see Welch (1985). [Back](#).

Note 8: See the memoirs of the first Soviet envoy to Cuba, Alexeev (1984). [Back.](#)

Note 9: See the analysis and memoirs by Nathaniel Davis (1985), U.S. Ambassador to Chile (1971-73). Quotation from page 7. Confirmation was required by the Chilean Congress because Allende did not win a majority of votes cast. [Back.](#)

Note 10: For a discussion of the magnitude and nature of U.S. actions, see U.S., House of Representatives (1975) and Davis (1985, chap. 12). [Back.](#)

Note 11: See, for example, Fortín (1975). Fortín was the last Ambassador-designate from Chile to the United States in the Allende government. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Both quoted passages from Schoultz (1987, 269-270). [Back.](#)

Note 13: Quoted in Pastor (1987, 250). [Back.](#)

Note 14: The most intelligent scholarly defense of Reagan administration policy toward Central America was Ronfeldt's (1983). [Back.](#)

Note 15: I am grateful to Laurence Whitehead for bringing this point to my attention. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Text in Richardson (1898, 10: 139 and ff.). [Back.](#)